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# Exploring Picture Books and Primary School Children's Spirituality

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## Abstract

Primary schools are required to promote children's spirituality, and this is regulated by the schools' inspectorate Ofsted (DfE, 2019). Yet, the conceptualisation of spirituality and how to recognise and nurture it receives little attention; challenges exist between policy expectations and practice. In addition, whilst other empirical studies of spirituality have used story as a context, none have sought deliberately to explore its potential as a conduit to allow children to bring their innate spirituality into the open. In response, this thesis, theoretically framed by reader response theory, explored the use of picture books as a way of fostering children's expressions of spirituality. It also examined how picture books themselves with their dual sign-systems and the teacher's pedagogic use of them, offer support for children to express their spirituality.

Underpinned by an interpretive hermeneutic phenomenological approach, a case study of three children aged 10 and 11 years was undertaken to capture the children's expressions of spirituality whilst they were engaged in responding to three picture fiction texts in their classroom. Findings reveal that when studying picture fiction, the children articulated their spirituality through empathy and concern for the human condition, by adopting a worldview, through meaning making and ordering experience, and by grappling with existential themes.

Findings from the study reflected that the teacher's aesthetic reading of stories and the value they afforded to children's authentic responses, allowed the picture books to facilitate abstract thinking and the cultivation of affective responses. Classroom dialogue along with the discussion of both word and image also supported children in nurturing their spirituality.

Consequently, the thesis argues for greater emphasis to be placed on the position of picture books in the primary classroom in order that, combined with a personal growth model of teaching and a situated literature spiritual pedagogy, pupils are offered the space to explore and express their spirituality.

## Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved and much missed mother who sadly died during this research journey. She is the light of my life, who exemplified spirituality in all ways and taught me so much about life. She continues to be an inspiration each day.

**Carol Ann Jones**

**1945-2014**



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*'We are not human beings on a spiritual journey. We are spiritual beings on a human journey.'*  
(Hart, 2003, p.8)

### 1.1 Setting the Scene: Impetus for the Research

As a classroom teacher, then Deputy Headteacher and now as Headteacher, with experience in four different primary schools, I have always relished sharing books with children. I always felt a strong connection to teaching children's literature and in every school I have taught telling a story be it a novel or picture book has captivated children's attention. This love of literature and of English as a subject deepened when I discovered multi-faceted picture books which offer pupils a way of exploring meaning. I believe my role as an educator serves a higher purpose: to equip children with a sense of themselves and others in the world, along with curricular knowledge so they can develop as enquiring members of society, and become the best they can be, able to make a difference in the world in any way possible.

Unbeknown to me, it appeared that the values and pedagogy I held onto so strongly could be broadly conceptualised as spiritual values and a personal growth model of teaching, where I allowed children to bring their own meanings to texts. I was very interested in children's spirituality and the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural (SMSC) curriculum, which was becoming more important in the national agenda (Ofsted, 2019). A link between children's literature and spirituality began to percolate in my mind and I questioned how I could articulate and demonstrate that I was nurturing their spirituality. I attended a local authority briefing on SMSC, read definitions of spirituality and was handed a copy of the Spiritual and Moral Development Document (SCAA, 1995). This captured my attention. I spoke with colleagues at school and other leaders, and almost all appeared to value spirituality as 'something' important, yet concrete examples were few beyond a daily assembly or discussion of school ethos. I was determined to explore the tentative links in my mind between children's literature and how children expressed spirituality. I had seen example after example of children engaging with complex issues in picture books and

novels, but were their responses spiritual and was it the literature that supported this expression? I felt compelled to combine these two professional passions to understand the nature of the possible links and to support my fellow practitioners.

## 1.2 Spirituality: Tensions between Policy and Practice

The professional impulse for this study is set against a backdrop of significant tensions between government policy and teacher practice. One of these tensions concerns the legal position for schools to promote spirituality in an increasingly utilitarian and accountable system which privileges measurable attainment. This has led to spirituality being deemed a 'soft' skill, not measurable and effectively marginalised. At the same time, a crisis in social and emotional needs among children is apparent. The 1944 Education Act (HMSO, 1944) effectively stated that the purpose of statutory education is the spiritual, moral, mental and physical development of the community. This duty was extended in 1988 Education Act (HMSO, 1988) which categorised schools' responsibility for spirituality as SMSC provision. I argue that placing spirituality together with cultural, moral and social education devalues and marginalises its importance. This chimes with the Peterson et al (2014) (Royal Society of Arts Report) which suggests that of all SMSC areas, spirituality is the most neglected in schools. This act also gave the school inspection regulatory body Ofsted the duty to inspect and report on SMSC in schools from 1992. This indicates that a serious duty has been placed on schools both from a moral and a legal perspective.

This duty has further been compounded by many successive and often competing government initiatives regarding children's well-being. The 'Every Child Matters' Agenda (HMSO, 2003) placed a duty on schools to foster children's health, well-being and contribution to society. Yet within an increasingly busy curriculum arguably spirituality was further marginalised. Following a change in national government more changes to SMSC followed.

The new National Curriculum (NC) (DfE, 2013) for primary schools further widened the gap between developing children's spirituality and developing high standards with no definition of what spirituality looks like and practically how if at all it can be achieved in the classroom. The NC placed a statutory duty on schools to:

‘Promote the spiritual, moral, cultural, mental and physical development of pupils at the school and of society.’

(DfE, 2013, p. 5)

Interestingly, it also highlighted the role of reading and English as a subject as being able to promote spirituality, especially literature:

‘Through reading in particular, pupils have a chance to develop culturally, emotionally, intellectually, socially and spiritually. Literature, especially, plays a key role in such development’.

(DfE, 2013, p. 13)

Whilst this is a signal to teachers to explore children’s spirituality it is a vague and tenuous link. Substantial changes to the Ofsted (2019) inspection framework have also intensified this problematic situation for practitioners, in terms of accountability.

‘Inspectors will evaluate the effectiveness of the school’s provision for pupils’ spiritual, moral, social and cultural education. This is a broad concept that can be seen across the school’s activities, but draws together many of the areas covered by the personal development judgement. Pupils spiritual development is shown by: A sense of enjoyment and fascination in learning about themselves, others and the world around them; Use of imagination and creativity in their learning; A willingness to reflect on their experiences.’

(Ofsted, 2019, p.59)

I argue such profound systemic change in terms of school accountability and direction pays lip service to the spiritual duties enshrined in law on schools. However, the characterisation of children’s spiritual development in the NC (DfE, 2013) supports the view that literature offers a space to use children’s imagination and creativity.

### 1.3 Perspectives of Spirituality

Spirituality is not clearly defined as a concept, which further problematises its place in the NC. Despite Ofsted (2019) characterising how to look for children’s spirituality there exists much contention and dispute as to the term. Research into spirituality in classrooms draws



upon a number of disciplinary approaches, philosophical, theological and psychological, and expresses the inherent difficulty in capturing a consensus. Such disparate disciplinary approaches have led to confusion, leading, I argue to a spiritual malaise in education as educators turn away from engaging with and attending to children's spirituality. This can lead to a sense of 'spiritual illiteracy' where pupils are unable to think or understand their own spirituality (Wright, 2000).

Definitions of spirituality tend to be reflective of subjective and personal views and 'to define it is to put sharp edges around a blurred idea' (Priestley, 1997, p. 28). Indeed, whether there is a need for a centripetal and utilitarian definition is questionable. Perhaps employing a poetic 'negative capability' (Keats, 1989) approach, living with doubt, uncertainty, mystery and not reaching a definitive clear understanding is apt for the study of this multi-faceted concept. Nonetheless, a definition is necessary for exploring its essence in primary school settings.

Wright (2000) has argued that two models of spiritual practice have developed in schools: exclusivist and inclusivist. Exclusivist models of spirituality focus upon a purely religious and theological knowledge-based theory, they contend that without a religious framework, spiritual expression becomes meaningless (Hay, 1982; Thatcher, 2000). This can be problematic in a secular society and can effectively marginalise spiritual expression from children who do not identify with a mainstream religion. This is particularly problematic as many teachers view spirituality as synonymous with religion and is compounded by the statutory nature of teaching RE and daily collective worship, which can lead teachers to reject spirituality. A more general attitude of 'understanding the religion from where the beliefs flow' rather than a purely exclusivist model of spiritual pedagogy is argued for by Wright (2000, p. 28). Similar problems occur at the other end of the spiritual spectrum with secular humanism (Newby, 1994), eschewing organised religion and focusing upon the meaning and purpose of human behaviour and express reality through language and metaphor rather than through structure (Erricker, Erricker, Sullivan, Ota, Fletcher et al, 1997).

An inclusive spiritual pedagogic model offers a holistic approach to spirituality. This focuses on spirituality as concern for the human condition. Despite being written some time ago as

curriculum guidance this model (School Curriculum Assessment Authority SCAA, 1995), has taken on something close to official recognition:

‘Spirituality is something fundamental in the human condition which is not necessarily experienced through the physical senses and/or expressed through everyday language. It has to do with relationships with other people and, for believers, with God. It has to do with the universal search for individual identity - with our responses to challenging experiences, such as death, suffering, beauty, and encounters with good and evil. It is to do with the search for meaning and purpose in life and for values by which to live’

(SCAA, 1995, p. 1).

Such an inclusive approach is encompassing of religious and secular spirituality, and frames spirituality as something bigger than religion (Hay and Nye, 1998). An inclusive model sees spirituality as a natural human disposition (Adams, Hyde and Wooley, 2008) and biologically inbuilt (Hay and Nye, 1998), which is expressed through a sensitivity and connectedness. Spirituality, from this perspective is something we are born with, something essentially dynamic that forever seeks articulation and expression in human living (Ó Murchú, 2000, p.37).

This inclusive model of spiritual pedagogy, far from forcing children to express their spirituality in a pre-conceived framework (Wright, 2000), seeks to add space for a rich plurality and diversity of voices and to nourish a hunger for spiritual articulation. Critics of an inclusive spiritual model suggest its principal focus is on emotion at the expense of criticality, and that such an individual quest for spiritual understanding disempowers children from critical thinking (Wright, 2000). I argue that adopting an inclusive spiritual pedagogy, which is informed by children’s literature through English teaching, could act as a bridge to merge both the critical and the emotional. Such a model could provide children with the understanding to negotiate the complex terrain of spirituality; selecting the way they feel would best express their own individual spirituality.

#### 1.3.1 Working Definition of Spirituality

My position is that spirituality is a natural human predisposition (Adams et al., 2008), that is to say that children are born with an in-built and biological predisposition to express

spirituality; and as the chapter begins children are essentially spiritual beings. This disposition constantly, under the right conditions, seeks articulation and expression (Ó Murchú, 2000). It can be conceptualised as a personal spiritual quest for the ultimate meaning of life through a relational understanding (Hyde, 2008). At the heart of the definition I am working with, described below, is a concern for the human condition and how humans relate and behave towards each other. All children are capable of spiritual expression and such an inclusive spiritual definition allows both religious and secular expressions to flourish. This definition, which encompasses a plurality of spiritual voices, offers a platform from which to capture the essence of spiritual expressions which children have a need to articulate. I have therefore adopted the following working definition:

*Spirituality is concern for the ultimate meaning of life and of the human condition. It is inbuilt in humans and it forever seeks articulation and expression through the senses and mind. It can be transcendental and expressed relationally and/or through the Divine.*

### 1.3.2 Personal View on Spirituality

Spirituality has been a strong part of my life even before I was able to recognise feelings and understanding which later, I deemed to be spiritual. I have always felt a strong connection to the Divine and pray and meditate, yet not through a formal Christian construct. Although my beliefs are sympathetic to the western Christian non-conformist church, my spiritual practice incorporates eastern traditions of meditation and reflexion. Such an eclectic understanding suggests that I am searching, as many people do, for 'expression of my spirituality outside of formal systems of values and beliefs' (Adams; et al 2008, p. 12). The presence of a God is central to my worldview and outlook, and I consider both my life and professional role as one of service, to express the best of me and to nurture the human condition and make individual meaning of my personal spiritual journey. Such relational consciousness and sensitivity (Hay and Nye, 1998) exemplify my own experiences of spirituality.

#### 1.4 Doctoral Research Questions

Reflecting upon the policy documents (DfE, 2013; Ofsted, 2019) indicates a tension exists between the legal mandate of spirituality in schools and how this is attended to practically in classrooms. Multiple and conflicting definitions of spirituality leave the 'spiritual landscape eclectic, complex and ambiguous' (Wright, 2000, p. 57) and multidisciplinary approaches to research have led to confusion (Ng, 2012). The significantly under-researched area of picture books and children's spirituality remain of interest. The question my doctoral study therefore seeks to answer is:

**How do 10-11-year-old children express their spirituality whilst engaging with picture books in the English primary classroom?**

In order to explore this, I make use of literary theory which positions the reader as a fundamental and essential part of the reading process (Rosenblatt, 1995). I seek to understand how children respond to literature through aesthetic reading transactions and effectively re-write their own virtual text drawing upon their own aesthetic experiences (Iser, 1980). Story and narrative as a way of thinking and understanding, drawing from the theory of mind (Turner, 1996) is also salient to the thesis which prioritises a narrative mode of thought (Bruner, 1986) and how thought is mediated by language (Vygotsky, 1986). An additional question thus seemed implicit to the work:

**How do picture books and the teacher's use of them support 10 and 11-year-old children to express their spirituality?**

#### 1.5 Summary of Introduction and Outline of Thesis

This chapter has explored the personal and professional impetus for the study and reflects my interest in spirituality and literature (1.1). A review of the tensions and competing aims between the policy of developing children's spirituality and the practice in the classroom were highlighted to provide a background for the research (1.2). Perspectives on spirituality revealed the complex challenge of defining spirituality (1.3) and a working definition was

articulated (1.3.1). My personal view of spirituality was discussed (1.3.2) and a rationale for my doctoral research questions offered (1.4). An outline of the thesis now follows.

In chapter 2, the Literature Review, literature pertaining to children's spirituality and literary theory framework is explored. Subsequent sections explore selected children's literature and picture books and empirical studies into children's literature and spirituality.

In chapter 3, Methodology, I outline and justify the research design and methodological approach in order to investigate how children aged 10-11 years express spirituality whilst engaging with picture books in the classroom. I attend to the ethical procedures and guidelines followed, and discuss the sensitive nature of the research.

In chapter 4, Data Analysis Part I, I present the data and discuss the first research question: how the children express their spirituality whilst engaged with picture books in the classroom.

In chapter 5, Data Analysis Part II, I present and discuss the data for the second research question: how picture books and the teacher's use of them support the 10 and 11-year-old children's expressions of spirituality.

In the final chapter, a summary of the main findings is presented together with a discussion of my contribution to knowledge. Practical suggestions for teachers and implications for policy and practice are considered, together with recommendations for further research.

‘We are such stuff as dreams are made on’

Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, Act 4, Scene 1

## 2.1 Introduction

In this chapter I locate my study within the research that exists in the field. I review key empirical studies (e.g. Erricker et al, 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998; Pike, 2000; Trousdale, 2004; Hyde, 2008) and their methodologies, with a focus on the salient areas in the relationship between children’s literature and spirituality. Through this I seek to highlight a growing chasm in research pertaining to expressions of children’s spirituality and the use of literature.

Initially in section 2.2, I review empirical studies in the field of children’s spirituality and locate my own methodological and theoretical framework to answer my research questions, setting out the limited nature and paucity of research into picture books and children’s spirituality. In Section 2.3 the relationship between literature and spirituality is explored through examining literature perspectives which underpin pedagogy in literature teaching. In section 2.4 an outline of the theoretical perspectives underpinning the power of story and narrative as a way of thinking is presented, along with a discussion of reader response theory.

In section 2.5 I navigate the pathway of existing research on the effects of children’s literature, and its relationship to children’s spirituality. I outline the limited research that exists in the use of children’s literature as a way to foster children’s spirituality, illustrating the gaps in current research and locating my own hermeneutic phenomenological study. I also explore the emerging concept of a spiritual pedagogy to support practitioners in fostering spiritual growth in schools.

An exploration of picture books as a genre of children’s literature is set out in section 2.6. I explore the theoretical assumptions and empirical studies in the ways children respond to picture books. I illustrate how my own thesis contributes towards closing an important gap

in our understanding of responses to picture books which may be of spiritual nature. In section 2.7 a chapter summary is offered.

## 2.2 Expressions of Children's Spirituality – Empirical Studies

In discussing empirical studies into children's spirituality and outlining methodological and theoretical frameworks which have captured reflections of children's spirituality in this section, I show how studies have identified and conceptualised spirituality among children.

### 2.2.1 Children's Worldviews

In the Children and Worldviews Project (Erricker, et al; 1997), researchers conducted unstructured interviews with children aged seven to eleven years from four primary schools, sometimes using storytelling, drawing or going for walks to stimulate spiritual discussion. They adopted a post-modernist approach to researching children's spirituality, where meanings are fluid and ever changing. I argue such an approach can be problematic and has implications for the wider generalisability and transferability of the claims made. By adopting a postmodernist view of childhood, the research allows for a plurality of stories to be created, but without access to ultimate truth (Wright, 2000). Children's narratives are personal to them however, they cannot be questioned, leaving nebulous findings about how children's inner worlds relate to and affect others, which remains unknown. Offering practical conclusions is therefore difficult.

The research suggests children possess an inner narrative or worldview and that truth may be related to personal narrative constructed out of individual experience (Erricker, et al., 1997). Interestingly for my study, which places narrative at the heart of the meaning making process, is Erricker et al. (1997)'s premise that children already possess a narrative within which they construct meaning. Children's own reality should be a starting point for teacher interaction with children according to Erricker et al. (1997) and its necessary to make sense of their spiritual worlds before imposing on them what we think they should know.

The overarching aim was to identify what children felt was important in their lives and that this determined the way they viewed the world (Erricker et al., 1997). The premise of an inner narrative needs further exploration; interviews suggested that children had an inner rich and complex spiritual life based upon their unique experiences of life pertaining to belonging, identity, death, heaven, families and animals. The spiritual life was not limited to children who identified with a specific religious tradition but rather was expressed as a relational concern for themselves and others. Their research is critical of a religious association to spirituality and any construct which presupposes a set belief on children. It endorses a more holistic conceptualisation of spirituality as defined in chapter 1. They contend that 'educators cannot impose upon children a narrative that does not engage with their own narrative and cannot insist upon a rationality that does not make sense in terms of the way children have constructed meaning from their experiences' (Erricker et al., 1997, p.8).

This has implications for my own study and the importance of teacher pedagogy in relation to how picture books are used by the teacher. It actively endorses the child's experience in the reading event, which is central to generating meaning and understanding. However, the research sets an interesting landscape for exploring spirituality, in which imagination and rich experiences are important and valued in the classroom and where individual *storying* is the basis on which notions of reality are constructed.

### 2.2.2 Relational Consciousness

In response to the 1988 Education Reform Act (HMSO), which required schools to provide for the spiritual, moral and cultural development of pupils, (see chapter 1), Hay and Nye (1998) sought to capture what children's spirituality looked like in the UK, in an increasingly secularised environment. This seminal empirical study into the characteristics of children's spirituality set a theoretical framework for the field, adopting a psychological relational consciousness to capture and identify children's spirituality. The three year-long project with children 6-7 years and ten-and eleven-years-old in schools with no religious affiliation centred on thirty-eight conversations with children from a range of ethnic and religious backgrounds. My study of children's spirituality also involved ten- and eleven-year-olds from diverse religious backgrounds.



One significant aspect of Hay and Nye's research was the claim that children's spirituality is innate, biologically inbuilt and seeks expression and articulation through a sensitive framework independent of any religious affiliation. They claim that 'spirituality occurred through a knowing which is akin to sensory awareness' (Hay and Nye, 1998, p.144). Observations during the research suggested that these aspects were visible as children went about their everyday lives. Children's expressions of spirituality identified in my study also submit that the spiritual is found in the everyday life of the child. Their research highlighted the personalised and individual nature of children's spirituality as something uniquely related to themselves and dependent upon their own psychology.

A grounded theory and thematic approach adopted in Hay and Nye's (1998) research allowed for the categorisation of a vast array of children's subjective experiences of spirituality on a continuum of awareness and sensitivity. This included value and mystery sensing. However, in my thesis, I seek to explore children's sensitivity in a different way. Through adopting a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology, I intend to capture children's lived experience of spiritual expressions. This is fully discussed and outlined in chapter 3. As with Erricker et al.'s (1997) research, Hay and Nye (1998) recognised an inner or hallowed space within children where they could explore their spirituality and named this first category awareness *and sensitivity*.

The second category involved children's *mystery-sensing*. This was tied up in the notion of transcendence: how children used their imagination to go beyond the confines of their everyday life through wonder and awe. Erricker et al. (1997) also argued, imagination and metaphor was a key ingredient in how children expressed and articulated their understanding of the spiritual (Hay and Nye, 1998).

Thirdly, *value-sensing* was identified pertaining to children's morality and their sense of right and wrong, good and evil. Hay and Nye noted that children readily expressed their ideas of worth or value through everyday experiences of personal delight or despair (1998, p.75). Hay and Nye (1998) illustrate that at the heart of children's spirituality is a quest for the discovery for ultimate meaning which chimes with the conceptualisation of spirituality in my thesis.

The use of the language of fiction as well as the languages of play and games was significant in the ways in which children in their research framed their spirituality, often drawing on characters in books, films or television to describe their experience (Hay and Nye, 1998). This reflects the power of story in children's lives and how this supports understanding and opportunities for spiritual reflection. Hay and Nye (1998) offer two important insights in the use of language as a tool for exploring spiritual understanding. Firstly, their discussion of fictitious or playful expressions by children as an attempt to explore a spiritual issue was salient as it was one of the children's own choosing and not one imposed upon them through a learnt, religious code of spirituality. Secondly, that 'language afforded considerable flexibility and playfulness which allowed children to have access to a powerful resource in contemplating matters of mystery and allowed them to be playful, creative, experimental' (Hay and Nye, 1998, p.120). The unwitting use of stories, films and television programmes as a method of articulating their spirituality in this research contrasts with the deliberate use of story through the use of picture fiction in my own research.

### 2.2.3 Children's Spiritual Capacities

The Secret Spiritual World of Children research carried out by Hart (2003) over a 5-year period from a psychological viewpoint collected accounts of the spiritual experiences of children through in-depth interviews, and recollections from adults of their own childhood spiritual experiences. He identified five spiritual capacities, ways in which spiritual experiences naturally flow: wisdom; awe and wonder; the relationship between one's self and other; seeing the invisible; and wondering about the ultimate questions of life (Hart, 2003). Interestingly for this thesis he posits that children have an inner spiritual world that pervades their lives and experiences and highlights their vast capacity for spiritual expression. Rejecting claims that children lack the sophistication of language and logic to explain their spirituality, he argues that, conversely, they have 'the capacity to open to the deep currents of consciousness' (Hart, 2003, p.19).

Hart argues, children have the capacity to be 'deeply empathetic and compassionate and can feel or share in the pain of others' (2003, p.69). He notes that children have a natural *moral compass* and can recognise hypocrisy and injustice from an early age, and children

formulate a strong desire to ensure children have the ability to anchor their lives in the power of compassionate hearts. He also recognised an 'empathic resonance' in the energy of children who through body to mind communication can understand and feel the rhythmic patterns of a close loved one or friend and intuitively recognise concerns or happiness (Hart, 2003).

At the centre of Hart's (2003) category 'wondering' is the nature of ultimate meaning making, and he suggests that as humans we hunger for and create meaning continually. The search for meaning and understanding is central to my own definition and conceptualisation of spirituality in this thesis. Children, he argues, are natural philosophers and contemplate the big questions in life linked to reality and death, truth and justice. He believes it is 'children's openness, vulnerability and tolerance for mystery that enable them to entertain perplexing and paradoxical questions' (Hart, 2003, p.93). Opportunities for such expressions of spirituality are possible in all three picture books in my study as children develop an understanding of challenging themes and seek to ponder upon these.

The experiences recounted to Hart (2003) further add to the understanding that spiritual experiences are unique to the individual and are concerned with creating meaning and understanding. Children experience spiritual events in their lives and Hart (2003) considers that this innate ability is potentially open to all children, so long as they are allowed to express what they see and feel, and are not dissuaded by adults that what they see is mere fantasy. To capture these illusive moments of spirituality suggests a sensitive and reflective methodological approach is required. Such a methodological consideration was adopted by Hyde's (2008) research, to whose work I now turn.

#### 2.2.4 Weaving Threads of Meaning

A more recent study into children's spirituality with primary school pupils is the work of Hyde (2008), which places meaning and connectedness at the centre of children's spirituality and uses a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology to locate expressions of this with 9-10-year-olds in Australia. The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology is a departure from the methodological field of a grounded theory approach adopted by Erricker et al., (1997) and Hay and Nye (1998); this approach seems more

supportive of the sensitive and individualised nature of capturing the essence of children's expressions of spirituality. Both Hyde's (2008) research and my own study use group interviews and interpret the data using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Whereas Hyde (2008) moves towards lifeworld existentialism (Van Manen, 1990) to locate the phenomenon of expressions of spirituality guided by lived space, lived body, lived time and lived other, I adopt an interpretive and hermeneutic conversation with the children's texts to explore the themes from their responses within the interpretive encounter (Van Manen, 1990).

Unlike other studies, Hyde (2008) approaches his research from a Catholic perspective and all participants are from Catholic state schools. Despite such an overtly faith-orientated perspective, Hyde (2008) adopts a broad and inclusive definition of spirituality, and argues that 'spirituality is better described than defined and that spirituality seeks expression within and outside the context of organised religion' (Hyde, 2008, p.23). Three core concepts form part of his definition of spirituality: 'spirituality as an essential human trait; spirituality as a concern towards the movement to ultimate unity; and spirituality as a given expression' (Hyde, 2008, p.43). This inclusive definition has parallels with my own conceptualisation and description of spirituality discussed in chapter 1, although mine is derived from a non-faith position.

He identified four areas of spiritual expression among children: a felt sense; an integrating awareness; a weaving of threads of meaning; and a spiritual questing (Hyde, 2008, p.82). These areas add to the categories of relational sensitivity set out by Hay and Nye (1998). Of importance to my thesis is the conclusion that children weave together threads of meaning to make connections with self, others, the world and God (Hyde, 2008). In all of the children's empirical studies discussed thus far (Erricker et al. 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008) a story was used amongst other items to initiate conversations about the spiritual, yet the power of using stories appears unrecognised. Consequently, I want to use story at the centre of my research to explore its power in allowing children to grapple with issues and complex emotional themes in the picture books. Which in turn could potentially lead to children weaving understandings drawn from both the texts and their own life experiences producing opportunities for spiritual reflection. He discusses how children, far from using a religious framework to support their expressions of spirituality, in fact draw

from a wide range of contexts to effectively weave together threads of meaning. Another element of Hyde's research which is pertinent to my own is exploring spiritual questing: 'children seek to explore existential realities and altruism; basically, an empathy for fellow mankind' (Hyde, 2008, p.125).

Many of Hyde's (2008) research findings develop the theoretical field further and add to an understanding of categories of spiritual expression; however, he does not fully explore how teachers can support children's spirituality when it is recognised, and many of his recommendations offer only superficial value to a busy practitioner. He offers a possible pedagogical model to promote spirituality in the primary classroom comprising three interdependent factors: cognitive, non-cognitive and spiritual. In an education system where cognitive understanding is prioritised, he proposes that teachers should find opportunities for emotional and spiritual reflection in everyday learning. My thesis explores if a literature based spiritual pedagogy might support this.

#### 2.2.5 Spirituality as the Real and Authentic Self

In research undertaken over 5 years in four English comprehensive schools, Wintergill (2008) working with eleven to eighteen-year-olds of all religions, sought to understand their perceptions of spirituality and what spirituality-in-education looked like. Through interviews and questionnaires, she claimed that teenagers differentiate between the spirit as a separate entity and spirituality as the process of activating this (Wintergill, 2008). One aspect of her research that sits comfortably with my own is that spirituality was viewed as a dynamic force, which influences your individuality, similar to my own conceptualisation of spirituality as innate and forever seeking articulation in the everyday. Secondly, spirituality was defined by the teenagers in the study as the 'real me', an authentic self (Wintergill, 2008). This has parallels with the concept of a personal growth model of teaching discussed in chapter 1 where the individual brings their own experience to learning which can lead to spiritual moments. Of note is that the teenagers highlighted RE, Personal and Social Education and assemblies as spaces which supported their spirituality. This arguably suggests they were unaware that English lessons, through the study of literature, could be supportive.

## 2.2.6 A Pedagogy of Awareness and Spirituality as a Little Person Inside Me

As discussed in chapter 1 there exists considerable debate around theoretical models of spiritual pedagogy. Ng's (2012) research sought to shift the focus of theory to practice in classrooms. Her phenomenographical study, carried out in two London schools with children aged 7-9, explored the different ways children interpret experience. Encapsulating spirituality as something broader than religion and expressed as relational and experiential, her research examined children's responses to a programme of spiritual activities using diaries, interviews, art and discussions with both children and teachers (Ng, 2012).

In contrast my own study explored opportunities for spiritual expression based on an existing literature-based curriculum. I think that there are challenges with Ng's (2012) spiritually designed programme. Firstly, there may be a temptation to create activities which are designed to 'fit' a pre-existing definition of spirituality and which may prevent children's authentic spirituality to flow. Secondly, as discussed in chapter 1, in an ever increasingly busy and demanding school curriculum, the time to set aside for a spiritual programme may be difficult if not somewhat fanciful in practice. An interventionist spiritually designed programme might detract from the everyday nature of children's spirituality in the classroom. Ng's (2012) research does though confirm that there is scope for spiritual exploration in the classroom. Her research also identified that certain types of pedagogy were conducive in moving beyond the superficial and allowing children to reflect on their spirituality.

In relation to the value of imagination as a means of mediating children's spiritual experiences, she postulates that children developed 'a little person inside me' (Ng, 2012, p.175) to reflect and think about their place and understanding in the world. The children, she argues, created worlds through which they could express their spirituality: The Emotive World, where they discussed their concerns and worries for themselves, families and society; the Existential World, where they sought to tackle injustices and make the world better; and the World of Concern, where power and influence were discussed. Imagination was also a key feature in mediating 2-3-year olds spiritual expressions through play in Goodliff's (2013) research. A hermeneutic approach to interpret nursery children's spiritual

expressions highlighted how they created unique and imaginary worlds and negotiated meaning through imaginative play (Goodliff, 2013, p.1058).

In sum, looking back across the empirical studies into children's spirituality that I have reviewed, one can see they illustrate the existence of an innate spirituality which seeks expression in the ordinary (Hay and Nye, 1998). That spirituality is articulated and conceptualised by the imagination and use of metaphor (Erricker et al, 1997), and expressed relationally by children to themselves and others (Hay and Nye, 1998). Children have a worldview or inner understanding from which spiritual reflection flows and which is influenced by story and experiences (Hyde, 2008). I now turn to literature which examines the relationship of spirituality to literature.

### 2.3 The Relationship between Literature and Spirituality

A strong link between literature and spirituality dates back to the Victorian period. Literature was viewed as an antidote to an increasingly disruptive and socially changing population: with the decline of religion, literature was seen as a spiritual panacea to 'delight and instruct, save souls and heal the state' (Eagleton, 2008, p.20). Matthew Arnold, a key figure in Victorian education, perceived literature as a way of filling the gap left by a decline in religion, principally as a means of humanising the middle class and controlling a working class with a zest for change. For Arnold literature was a way of saving society from descending into anarchy. Literature thus took on the ideological burden of religion, acting as a 'liberal and humanising' effect upon society (Eagleton, 2008, p.22).

This burden was maintained through the World Wars when spiritual hunger for understanding surged; literature essentially became an 'area where the most fundamental questions of human existence what it meant to be a person, to engage in significant relationship with others' were asked (Eagleton, 2008, p.27). Literature was a way of transmitting essential societal values and what it meant to be human. It took on a felt and aesthetic quality and (Eagleton, 2008) argues became a symbolic way of understanding the human condition, developing more as a spiritual exploration than a subject. Through reading literature, it was possible to become a better person. It is to this special personalised response to literature I now turn.

### 2.3.1 A Personal Growth Model of Teaching

English as a subject has been viewed at times as a powerful vessel through which ideological ideas and views could be pursued. This is reflected in the influential Cox Report on the values underpinning English as a curriculum subject (Cox, 1989). This report, despite being written many years ago, remains an unyielding presence in the psyche of many teachers today (Boustead, 2000; McGuinn, 2005). It outlined the rationale for English as a subject and privileged a personal growth model of teaching, noting:

‘A personal growth view focuses on the child; it emphasises the relationship between language and learning in the individual child, and the role literature plays in the developing of children’s imagination and aesthetic lives’

(Cox, 1989, p.22)

Such a model endorses the idea that young people bring their own life experience to the reading encounter. Children, Cox (1989) argued, use literature as a means of personal discovery and expression to make sense and order out of their lives. A personal growth model of teaching is underpinned by the role narrative plays in developing meaning and understanding and is central to this study.

### 2.3.2 Imagination and Narrative

The development of children’s imagination through the right to tell their own story is a key element of a personal growth model of teaching, as ‘narrative is a primary act of mind transferred to art from life’ (Hardy, 1998, p.12). Such a statement has profound implications for the use of picture books which, I argue, are essentially works of art. Humans have been using story as a means of self-expression and meaning making for centuries and we are effectively story animals, indeed Gottschall, (2013) argues stories make us human. As such, stories dominate human consciousness and offer possibilities of making order and sense of our lives, by allowing us to bring our own stories to the texts and to discover others’ stories, whether fiction or factual.

Smith (1992) argues that imagination is a powerful force for thinking:



‘Our imaginary realities are furnished with the same basic structures and relationships as those found in the world around us, not because our imaginations are limited to what we have experienced, but because experience is constrained by what we can imagine’

(Smith, 1992, p.7)

Storytelling can be transformative in terms of forging relationships with others and can help us make sense of the past and maybe the future. We learn about others through their own stories and through how their stories relate to ours. Hardy (1988, p.13) exemplifies the omnipresent state of story in our lives arguing ‘We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticise, construct, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative’. The literary mind, far from being a privileged and cultured aspect of thought, is actually argued to be the everyday mind and the basis of everyday thought (Turner, 1996). Story is a way the brain organises and makes sense of our everyday experiences and such narrative imagining is a ‘literacy capacity indispensable to human cognition’ (Turner, 1996, p.5).

Stories can be viewed as a blueprint for the imagination. Hughes (1999) posits that familiar myths or stories learnt by children act as a catalyst from which the imagination can flow. Children can enter and re-enter these familiar stories which light up their own experiences. Meek further adds to this by endorsing the concept that stories in fact make worlds and that ‘humans begin by telling themselves fairy tales and end by telling truths’ (1999, p.225).

### 2.3.3 Storytelling and Metaphor: Meaning Making

Having identified the power narrative plays in our lives, one further facet is the vicarious experience literature holds.

‘Literature has enormous educational potential; it can enable children to experience a range of emotions safely and vicariously, promote understanding of the human condition... It can be a source of reflection on universal themes of courage, love, sacrifice, compassion’.

(Gamble, 2007, p.96).

Such a powerful vicarious influence can act as a catalyst for change and growth, affecting a child's inner story about themselves and how they wish to live. Along with a sense of vicarious experience, stories allow us to work indirectly on the problems in our own lives mirrored in the lives of fictional characters. The reality of our outer world can be expressed to a great extent through the distillation of stories shared with each other. Such narratives can be those personally recounted, or from those enacted in dramas on television, or in games. Our outer world can be characterised as an amalgam of all the stories we have heard, interpreted and created. Symbolic images and experiences are articulated and made coherent through story: 'Constructing stories in the mind or storying... is one of the most fundamental means of meaning making' (Wells, 1986, p.194). Storying can offer a metaphor for grounding often abstract and symbolic representations of experience and thought into intelligible understanding. Indeed, Wells (1986) argues for the redemptive nature of storytelling as a means by which the teller gains control over the world.

Important to this study, is the power of story to give coherence to the otherwise inexplicable. To make sense of often abstract and internal perceptual information, storying allows an expression for what otherwise might be mysterious. Storying has been argued as a natural inbuilt biological predisposition through which perceptual information is recorded and processed (Wells, 1986). Storying may not be a conscious activity but in fact the way in which the mind itself works as Hardy (1988) argued.

Meaning is always the result of an amalgamation of all someone has read, heard or seen, Bakhtin claims that our language or discourse is 'always half-ours and half-someone else's' (1981, p.345). He asserts that this discourse has a type of interior persuasiveness which is malleable and borderless; such a discourse allows words to 'awaken new and independent words' (Bakhtin, 1981, p.345). This is further influenced by the concept of polyphony: he argues that there is a multiplicity of voices within a text and that the authorial voice is not supreme. Importantly for my research he advocates the importance of dialogic interaction in creating meaning: 'truth is not born nor found inside the head of an individual person. It is born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110). Adopting this argument places importance on how the teacher effectively mediates language and the stories in the picture books allowing children a space for dialogue.

## 2.4 Literary Theoretical Perspectives

In this section I present the literary theories I draw upon to advance how fiction and narrative can be a way of organising thought and understanding experience. I outline how the reader response theory and theory of mind supports this thesis.

### 2.4.1 How Fiction Works in the Minds of Readers

Reader response theory posits that neither reader nor text are the full repository of meaning and that a transaction takes place between what the reader brings to the text and the author's aims (Rosenblatt, 1995). Such theories acknowledge the role the reader has in evoking meaning in literary work; a pedagogy informed by reader response theory encourages pupils to bring themselves to the reading encounter.

Central to the argument outlined in this thesis is that both text and child are important in any reading encounter and it is the dynamics in this relationship that are explored in relation to how picture books could support expressions of spirituality. Rosenblatt (1995) maintains that literature offers the reader a range of choices, aspirations and values out of which the individual must weave his own personal philosophy, or spiritual view in the case of this thesis. This lends itself to exploring children's meaning or worldview (Erricker et al; 1997) and individual philosophy whilst engaged in the act of reading. This theory can therefore support an understanding of children's expressions and thoughts pertaining to spirituality, leading to uncovering of insights on the part of the reader.

The literary experience, reader response theorists (Iser, 1980; Bruner, 1986; Rosenblatt, 1995) argue, is a synthesis of what the reader already knows with what the text offers. This synthesis of known and undiscovered knowledge of the world can be used to support an understanding of children's thought processes during reading:

'The transaction between reader and text is situated through the use of words the text brings into the reader's consciousness, and the reader then brings to the work memories and past experiences and the reader and text act upon each other'

(Rosenblatt, 1995, p.30)

Rosenblatt asserts that 'the text remains ink spots on paper until the reader transforms them into meaningful symbols and adopts a subjective view of the nature of the meaning of works of literature', with the reader central to the process of meaning making (1995, p253). Iser (1980) develops this further arguing that the reader potentially 're-writes' the text to support the development of their own narrative.

Literature, picture books in the case of this study, can offer children 'gaps' or opportunities within the text which they can fill with their own meanings and experiences. Bruner (1986) augments this notion of gaps in the text, stating that 'stories of literary merit are about events in the real world, but render that world newly strange, rescue it from oblivion, and fill it with gaps that call upon the reader, in sense, to become a writer, a composer of a virtual text in response to the actual one' (Bruner, 1986, p.24). Iser (1980) offers the theoretical basis from which to explore pupils as composers of their own texts, using their own narrative or worldview whilst engaged in reading. Fictional texts constitute their own objects and are unique in that they do not have the full determinacy of real objects. It is this very indeterminacy that Iser (1980) claims evokes the text to communicate with the reader, inducing him or her to participate both in the production and the comprehension of it.

Situating reading as an aesthetic encounter between reader and text, places the reader at the heart of the meaning making process. Bruner (1986) too asserts that the discourse in a text must make it possible for the reader to write his own virtual text; he suggests three features are illustrative of this. The first is 'presupposition', which is the creation of implicit rather than explicit meanings within the text. The second is 'subjectification', which is the depiction of reality through the consciousness of the protagonists in the story. Thirdly, the story offers 'multiple perspectives of the world' (Bruner, 1986, p.26). This approach suggests 'the reader is taken into a new critical awareness where literature violates or transgresses normative ways of thinking, teaching new ways of seeing and understanding' (Eagleton, 2008, p.70). Bruner (1986) summarises this construction of a virtual text when noting:

'Yet children possess a stock of maps which might give hints and they may know a lot about journeys and about mapmaking. The initial terrain is based on older journeys and in time the virtual text becomes a story of its own and he contends that it is then the reader asks what it is all about? And the 'it' is not the actual text but the text the reader has constructed under its sway'.

(Bruner, 1986, p.37).

The subjectivity of the real text is sufficient to allow the reader in fact to become the writer of his own experience. This places the arguments I have outlined regarding the importance of narrative and story in the pursuit of truth and meaning in context. Jauss (1982) views the encounter between text and reader as related to a change in horizon. He contends that the disparity between the reader's 'horizon of expectation' and an encounter with a new text can bring about a change in horizon through raising newly articulated experiences to the level of consciousness (Jauss, 1982, p.23).

I argue that narrative fiction can have a powerful effect on the minds of pupils from a cognitive-psychological perspective. This is conceptualised from a Shakespearian understanding that far from being entertainment, fiction is a guided dream, a model that as Oatley (2011) insists readers construct in collaboration with the writer, which enables us to see ourselves and others more clearly. How children internalise meaning from the themes discussed in picture books and transport them far beyond the writers' story, making it their own dream or story, is a salient area for my own study. As this chapter begins 'we are such stuff that dreams are made on' (Shakespeare) and this dream can 'offer us glimpses beneath the surface of the everyday world' (Oatley, 2011, p.1) and works in various ways.

Firstly, reading fiction increases understanding of self and others, and narrative reflects our everyday lives and acts as a kind of stimulation for the brain, a stimulation of self and how we interact with the wider world (Oatley, 2011). 'Imagination gives us entry to abstraction; through imagination we can enter many more situations than we could possibly experience in a lifetime' (Oatley, 2011, p.30).

Secondly, dream is the use of metaphor as a mode of thought. Story and narrative are effectively metaphors; narrative and the imagining-story is the fundamental instrument of thought and its function is to give the world meaning (Turner, 1996). Meaning making as an expression of spirituality is discussed in chapter 4 and it is argued that in this study children's engagement with the stories in the picture books were projected to create their own stories of meaning and understanding.

The narrative mode of thought offers the potential to understand the reality of the pupils' meaning making process when engaged with the texts. Bruner (1986) states that there are two modes of thought, each of which provides distinctive ways of ordering experience and constructing reality which are irreducible to each other (Bruner, 1986, p.11). For this study of literature and spirituality, the most relevant is:

'The narrative mode of thought, which eschews the paradigmatic mode for its what is often described as a heartless logic and compulsion to seek logical proof, quantifiable and verifiable in its hypothesis and lack of imagination regulated by its language of consistency and non-contradiction'

(Bruner, 1986, p.12).

The narrative mode of thought adds further weight to Hardy's (1988) theory of narrative of mind, discussed above, and identifies closely with my conceptualisation of spirituality in chapter 1.

Bruner views the narrative mode of thought aesthetically, suggesting that works of art become a way of experiencing reality and developing meaning; he notes that 'great works of fiction transform narrative into an art form and come closest to revealing 'purely' the deep structure of the narrative mode of thought in expression' (Bruner, 1986, p.15). Adopting this theoretical position would allow pupils' aesthetic experiences with texts to be 'brought to life' and permits investigation into the nature of the reality of their experiences.

#### 2.4.2 Fiction and Empathy Development

Theory of mind adds further layers to reader response theory, since reading fiction is not only beneficial but important for our cognitive and emotional development (Nikolajeva 2013). Reading picture books therefore can offer an opportunity to support children's theory of mind and empathy, allowing them to learn about themselves and better understand others.

Consequently, when the reader engages with the emotions of fictional characters in picture books, mirror neurons in the brain act to stimulate the emotions as if they were authentic and happening in 'real life' (Nikolajeva, 2012). Cognitive criticism purports that 'when we

engage with fictional characters, we make connections between the mediated experience of the text and the emotional memories stored in the brain' (Nikolajeva, 2012, p.276). It is argued therefore that, when children make affective responses to picture books, a connection is made between highly charged stored memories by the reader and the fictional characters in literature. Such a connection is labelled as *misattribution*, (Nikolajeva, 2012) attributing our own emotions onto those of characters.

An important step forward in addressing the paucity of empirical research into how fiction affects the mind (theory of the mind) is the quantitative study of Kidd and Castano (2013). They posit that the theory of mind 'allows humans to understand how others think' (2013, p.377). They distinguish between aspects of theory of mind: affective, which is essentially empathy (understanding the emotions of others), and cognitive, which is inferring and representing the beliefs held by others (2013). The research involved a set of experiments with eighty-six adult participants and distinguished between fiction and non-fiction reading, developing a hypotheses regarding literary fiction that was carried out in a further 5 experiments.

Kidd and Castano (2013) posit that reading literary not popular fiction affects theory of mind processes. In literary fiction, the stories and characters' actions compel readers to engage in a form of mind reading, engaging with such a myriad of polyphonic voices in the texts that readers are mirroring theory of mind processes. The research adds further weight to the argument that fiction can engender a range of thought process which are both cognitive and affective. Of particular relevance to my own research is the ability of readers to develop an empathy towards fictional stories and characters and which I now address.

Nikolajeva argues that 'empathy is the ability to understand other people's emotions and that this is the most important capacity which distinguishes us from other living organisms and is an essential social quality' (2013, p.249). Picture books offer one way of fostering empathy in children as they present opportunities for readers to connect and interpret others' emotions. Nikolajeva (2013) claims that images in picture books often convey strong emotions where words would otherwise be insufficient or inadequate. Empirical studies confirm that children respond emotionally to picture books (Sipe, 2008; Evans, 2009; Arizpe and Styles 2016).

Empathy and mind reading in actual life are described as the 'capacity to attribute mental states to other people based on actions and reactions, facial expressions, body language and other external signs' (Nikolajeva, 2012 p.275). Cognitive theory helps to explain how mirror neurons enable our brain to stimulate responses to visual stimuli as if they were real. Iacoboni postulates that 'we achieve our very subtle understanding of other people thanks to certain collections of special cells in the brain called mirror neurons' (2008, p.4). In fact, mirror neurons allow us to feel the suffering or pain of others as if it were our own and provide a plausible neuropsychological explanation for complex forms of social cognition and interaction. Ramachandran expands on Iacoboni's (2008) research, states that there is a 'dynamic interplay of signals from mirror neurons which allow a feeling of reciprocity with others whilst maintain a sense of individuality' (Ramachandran 2011, p.291).

De Souza (2014), a researcher into spirituality and education, contends that theory of mind, supports humans to directly feel the actions and emotions of others, and has implications to the relational and connectedness aspects of children's spirituality as set out by Hay and Nye (1998). Advocating that a more empathic dimension to children's lives can support their spiritual well-being, and that there is a strong link between mirror neurons and empathy. In addition, she posits that 'if connectedness expressed through relationality is the essence of spirituality, then empathy becomes the experience and expression of spirituality' (De Souza, 2014, p.48). She contends that to promote children's spiritual well-being, teachers should be cognisant of the effect mirror neurons have and how empathy can be developed in schools. One of her key recommendations is the use of story to allow children to develop empathic feelings:

'If children through the action of the mirror neurons discover that their stories resonate with others, this will potentially, raise their awareness and their connectedness with others which in time should promote a feeling of empathy and enhance the spiritual dimension of learning'.

De Souza, 2014, p.53



Cooper (2013) who researched different types of empathic relationships in primary schools, argues that a 'profound empathy' is reminiscent of the relationship teachers have between the affective and the intellectual. A profound empathy allows children to explore personal and constructive emotional responses in the classroom; and is redolent of a 'heightened awareness and sense of awe and wonder, provoking a tussle with the great questions of life and feeling at one with others and the wider cosmos' (Cooper, 2013, p.230).

## 2.5 Children's Spirituality and Literature

Research into children's spirituality and the role literature can play in supporting this has tended to focus on poetry (Pike, 2000) and latterly novels (Trousdale, 2004; Posey, 2013). The relationship between spirituality and other school subjects has also been the focus of interest, such as how children's literature in history lessons can offer moments through which learning can merge into the spiritual (Cottingham, 2005). However, only two UK based studies explore the relationship between spirituality and children's literature, one through a study of poetry with secondary school pupils and written some time ago (Pike, 2000) and one relating to picture books and spirituality (Kendall, 1999).

### 2.5.1 The Relationship between Children's Literature and Spirituality: Empirical Research

There has been only one study into the use of picture books to explore children's spiritual development through meaning-making, undertaken twenty-one years ago (Kendall, 1999). It was part of classroom-based research exploring the use of picture books with 8-year-olds. The research methodology included a mixture of one-to-one semi-structured interviews, writing activities and guided reading over a period of 5 weeks. Since this, substantial developments have taken place in the theoretical and psychological frameworks which support an understanding of children's spirituality (Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008; Posey, 2013; Goodliff, 2013), and as such Kendall's (1999) research leaves the terrain open for further understanding how picture books can support children's spirituality in 21<sup>st</sup> century educational settings. Subsequent research into how children respond and make meaning from picture books has also advanced our understanding of

their potential, as discussed later in this review (e.g. Evans, 2009; Arizpe et al., 2015; Maine, 2015; Arizpe and Styles, 2016) and I seek to connect to these in my own study.

Nonetheless her work outlines the value of picture books, showing that they have layers of meaning and are a way of supporting children's meaning making, which in turn can be described as an aspect of spiritual development. Her research also draws upon the theoretical work of (Bruner 1986; Iser 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995) and she purports that children can bring individual experiences to the reading encounter and make connections to the human condition. Spirituality in her study was conceptualised as a form of meaning making, whereas in my study, I conceive spirituality more broadly as an innate concern for the human condition, as a relational experience. I also consider the teacher's use of picture books in nurturing spirituality.

#### 2.5.2 Poetry and Children's Spirituality

Whilst research in the field has identified different facets of children's literature and their respective relationships to fostering children's spirituality, the role of the teacher and the type of pedagogy used to allow this relationship with literature to flourish deserves further exploration. The nature of aesthetic teaching and the tentative beginnings of the development of a spiritual pedagogy that I develop in this thesis seek to address this. Pike (2000) has been a significant contributor to the field of literature and spirituality, both empirically and theoretically. His 3-year longitudinal study of adolescents' spiritual responses to poetry provided an influential foundation to research in the field for two principle reasons: firstly, in the theoretical framing and importance of aesthetic teaching and literary theorists; and secondly, in the development of a conceptual 'responsive pedagogy' informed by a personal growth model of teaching and reader response theory as teaching methodology.

Using a case study of six secondary school pupils from thirteen to sixteen years old, Pike (2000) focused primarily on children who had hitherto been reluctant to read poetry and on the connection between poetry and pupils' spiritual and moral growth. He claims that English as a curriculum subject is more uniquely placed than other subjects to facilitate the development of children's spirituality, as 'many English teachers have experience of

spiritual matters and moral issues, as a result of the pedagogy they employ and in the issues that present themselves from studying literary works' (Pike, 2004, p.177). Pike (2000) also notes and highlights the policy tensions in schools which stem from the requirement to promote SMSC and the limited curriculum time given to focus on it. English and literature in particular, offers a unique conduit to overcome this tension as it's a compulsory subject and for its aesthetic nature.

Pike posits that 'literature often provides a language which young people make their own' (2000, p.178), and his research points to a meta-language or discourse that children use to explore poetry that mirrors that which is used to express spirituality. Such implications for the power of English as a subject to promote and nourish children's spirituality are therefore worthy of consideration in a primary school context, particularly in response to the policy challenges outlined in chapter 1, since these remain.

Spirituality is defined in Pike's (2000) research not as specifically religious but through demonstrating a sensitive awareness to others and to literature or art and he links this sensitivity to the theoretical concept of aesthetic reading (Rosenblatt, 1995). Pupils' aesthetic response to a work of literature is viewed as important as the text itself, and 'spiritual growth occurs where pupils acquire insights into their personal existence' (Pike, 2000). He also argues that there is no separation between spiritual awareness and a response to literature as both are 'responses to our very essence of existing as human beings' (Pike, 2000, p.179).

#### A Responsive Pedagogy

For Pike, 'spiritual development does not occur directly from the study of a text but rather *how* the text is studied' (2000, p.180); the 'how' is the result of a pedagogy informed by the reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995; Iser, 1980) which 'focuses on the growth of the whole reader and not simply on the text' (Pike, 2000, p.181). This situated pedagogy is important in guiding practitioners practically in supporting pupils' expressions of spirituality in the classroom. Such a pedagogy prioritises and acknowledges the life experiences and spiritual faculties of the reader over the text, and prompts the teacher to facilitate the transaction between text and reader (Pike, 2000).

Pike's research provided insights into how children's personal engagement with poetry through this pedagogy had both challenged the children's spiritual views, (through having to grapple with issues relating to the human condition), and resulted in new directions and opinions. Through bringing their own limitations and self to the text, Pike suggests that 'the poems have been read with students as moral agents which can be considered as expressions of spirituality' (2000, p.189). I argue that picture books as well as poetry may offer children at primary age level the opportunity to tussle with such issues.

### 2.5.3 Power of Story and Children's Spirituality – Empirical Study

Story and the power of narrative are, as I argued in chapter 1, a fundamental part of the human condition, and Trousdale's (2004) study into story, highlights that spiritual leaders communicate complex spiritual issues through handing down stories across generations. She also notes the appeal that narrative has over both adults and children, and advances the power of narrative in fostering children's spiritual development.

Trousdale's (2004) study draws upon the theoretical work of Bruner (1986), acknowledging that children can adopt a narrative mode of thinking to order experience and generate meaning. She states that 'stories invite children to enter a world not their own, vicariously to identify with story's characters and their situations, thus stimulating their emotions, imaginations, cognitive powers and moral reasoning' (Trousdale, 2004, p.185). Her study centred around biblical stories at a Sunday school in the US and her conceptualisation of spirituality is informed by a Christian perspective and discusses godly play (Berryman, 1993) whereas I adopt a more holistic and inclusivist model (as discussed in chapter 1). Methodologically I adopt a similar wonderings approach to children's questions (Berryman, 1993), using open ended and exploratory questions such as 'I wonder which part of the story was you, or I wonder which is your favourite part of the story' to gain an insight into children's thinking (see chapter 3 on methodology). Relevant for this thesis is the malleability of the story through talk and how the space created through exploration can foster vicarious engagement with the text.

The importance of story and narrative as ways of articulating spiritual experiences has been documented by Scott (2001). In empirical research, Scott (2001) used narrative as a methodological tool for capturing spiritual understanding of teenagers and adults reflected upon their own childhood spiritual experiences. He contends, as does this thesis, that storytelling is a way of expressing spirituality and that 'personal narratives act as a point of entry into interpreting spiritual experiences when a space for interpretation is engendered' (Scott, 2001, p.120). I argue that story, through picture books, is a way of offering such a space for interpretation of spiritual experiences. Storytelling can also be a way of relating and understanding one's own spirituality: Bosacki contends that 'the spiritual act itself, the story and the listener' are inextricably bound up in the expression of spirituality (2001, p.157).

#### 2.5.4 Fantasy Fiction Novels and Children's Spirituality - Empirical Research

One of the few recent empirical studies into spirituality and children's literature is the work of Posey (2013) in the US. Her research looked at four ten-and eleven-year-olds, all of whom came from a religious background, reading two fantasy stories. Employing a hermeneutic phenomenological approach to the study through interviews and analysis of children's art, she investigated how their responses created a space to discuss perceptions of the Divine (Posey, 2013).

Posey's research presents four areas of relevance to my own study: first, the exploration of the use of literature as a conduit to create a space for children's spiritual expression; secondly, a theoretical framework which adds to the field of knowledge through reader response theory and spirituality as a relational consciousness; thirdly, a methodological approach which favours recounting the lived experiences of children through a hermeneutic phenomenological approach with a sample of similar aged participants; and finally, the development of the concept of 'spiritual discourse' in the way children use language to discuss spirituality (2013, p143). The use of imagination and story to ground children's understanding of the spiritual was seen as the children drew from books other than those being studied to describe and reflect their understanding of the Divine (Posey, 2013); this reflects the power of narrative in story. Posey (2013) suggests that more research is needed that follows a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology and examines the use of picture books, both of which my study seeks to do.

In sum, the empirical studies discussed here (Pike, 2000; Trousdale, 2004; Posey 2013,) used poetry and novels as a way of exploring and stimulating children's spirituality. There is a need to explore other forms of children's literature such as picture books and to deepen the understanding of using hermeneutic phenomenology as a methodological tool to examine the relationship with children's literature and spirituality.

#### 2.5.5 Cognitive Conflict, Reflexive-Empathy: Spirituality, Literature and History

Action research documented by Cottingham (2005) into how the use of literature in history lessons can foster children's capacity for meaning making offers three interesting points in relation to the use of a reader response theory.

Firstly, the research contends that using literature in history lessons has the capacity to develop children's meaning making through establishing a 'cognitive conflict' where children confront and make judgements about events and behaviours. Through such internal cognitive conflict, a worldview can emerge, providing a space for expressions of spirituality to flourish (Cottingham, 2005). Historical subject matter, when supported by literature, necessitates children to deal with 'the complexity of questions at the essence of humanity establishing a cognitive conflict through which spiritual development is fostered' (Cottingham, 2005, p.45). Despite this research being carried out with secondary school pupils, fourteen and fifteen year olds, I suggest that primary school pupils contend with similar issues, all of which go to the heart of the complexity of the human condition.

Secondly, Cottingham's research explores an important aspect of children's expression of spirituality: the concept of reflexive-empathy. Cottingham terms this as 'encouraging pupils to examine their own lives, beliefs and attitudes in light of their understanding of people's lives in the past' (2005, p.50). This concept has implications not only for historical enquiry, but also for multi-layered picture books which deal with similar subjective issues. My description of spirituality in chapter 1 sits comfortably with such reflexive empathy as an element of what it means to express spirituality.

Cottingham claims that history as a subject, studied alongside literature, can ‘give children a discourse to enable them to articulate moral and spiritual concepts’ (2005, p.53). Advancing the idea that the key to text interpretation begins with the child and meaning is developed through collaborative classroom discussion; the case studies are redolent of the teacher’s use of pedagogic discourse through a ‘responsive pedagogy’ (Pike, 2000).

In this section I have outline the empirical research into the relationship between children’s literature and spirituality, focusing on poetry and novels. I now move to discuss in 2.6 the existing literature related to responses to picture books which form the central component of this thesis.

## 2.6 Children’s Responses to Picture Books

This section highlights picture books as a genre of children’s literature and considers their unique role involving a dual narrative, a two-sign system whereby the reader is confronted with both text and pictures to generate meaning. Empirical research into children’s responses to picture books is considered (e.g. Evans, 2009; Arizpe et al., 2015; Maine, 2015; Arizpe and Styles, 2016) to illustrate how children respond emotionally and affectively and use these texts to support and extend their understanding.

Bader’s well-known definition of picture books places this form of art in its literary context:

‘A picture book is a text, illustrations, total design; an item of manufacture and a commercial product; a social, cultural, historical document; and foremost an experience for a child. As an art form it hinges on the interdependence of pictures and words, on the simultaneous display of two facing page, and on the drama of the turning page.’

(Bader, 1976, p.1).

The polysemic picture book, a book capable of multi-layered meanings, often goes ‘beneath serious critical notice’ (Hunt, 2008, p.128), yet it is arguably a unique form of children’s literature in that readers are asked to navigate both pictorial and written narrative.

This seminal study explores children responses to complex picture books. Thematic trends from children's responses to picture books were identified through grounded theory in seven UK primary schools with eighty-four children from different socio-economic areas. In-depth interviews were held with two boys and two girls from three different classes per school, from three age groups: 4-6 years, 7-9 years and 9-11 years. The research was theoretically framed, as much of children's literature research is, upon reader response theory, which, as outlined earlier, favours the aesthetic nature of reading (Rosenblatt, 1995) and suggests that readers fill in gaps in the text through omissions with their own virtual text (Iser, 1980). Four areas are identified as salient to my study.

Firstly, Iser's (1980) argument that readers respond by filling gaps in the texts through their own experience is broadened when text is combined with pictures; Arizpe and Styles's (2016) research acknowledged this through the way children linked words and pictures together, filling openings left by ambiguity in the pictures and resulting in a 'combination of intellectual challenge, aesthetic pleasure, amazement and puzzles to unravel' which led to children's expressions of personal experience through analogy (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p. 86). They also commented on how children were able to discern the different meanings between text and pictures and became aware of the two dynamic systems at play 'reflecting the processes that are going on in the reader/viewer's head as they attempt to construct a story using different kinds of building blocks' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.25).

Secondly, whilst consideration of children's spiritual expressions did not fall within the remit of their research, they do present useful understandings of how teachers can draw upon children's own experience when reading picture fiction. As children viewed the illustrations they appeared to 'encompass their past within the present time', leading to an authenticating of experiences as they discussed them, and such experience was a 'foundation for reflective discussions' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.62). Such authenticity of responses is echoed by others who argue that barriers are removed between children and adults when discussing pictures, which leads to a greater level of collaboration, where all experiences are valid and are not constricted or coloured by written or intellectual systems (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006). Underlying the active role children play in reading, findings



suggested that their memories formed an important feature in the deconstruction of illustrations (Arizpe and Styles, 2016).

The complexity of reading a picture book is that meaning is derived from picture, text and the book as a whole work of art. This complexity guided my approach in using the picture books and is discussed in chapter 5 as my own data reflected such a dual process of negotiating meaning between text and picture. Arizpe and Styles's work also supports the development of a responsive pedagogy discussed in section 2.5.2 (Pike, 2000), as children's own experience in the reading of picture books is central to developing an authentic understanding.

Intertextuality, the process of linking the text to other books and authorial style was evident in comparisons children made in Arizpe and Styles' study, along with questions framed around visual features pertaining to a character's place in the picture, and their body language. They highlight perspectival counterpoint (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006), as a mechanism which fosters readers' imaginations and stimulates the reading process and fosters imagination, stirring empathetic engagement in the text (Arizpe and Styles, 2016). Children made connections between picture and text as a tool to support meaning-making and acknowledges the role art can play. They note that 'memories of personal experience crowd in as the painting intersects with our lives in a text-to-life moment; ideas begin to bubble up and hints at deeper understandings begin to suggest themselves. This is the creative process at work which is a mixture of imagination, fantasy, recollection and wonder – the unconscious in collaboration with cognitive activity' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p10).

The group discussions indicated that children were able to ponder issues 'reaching beyond the literal and using their own experience' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.28). The children often drew 'analogical understandings' between fantasy and reality and discussed the need for finite and careful circumspection of details in the images along with searching for the moral of the story (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.28). Such discussions resonate with the ingredients of expressions of spirituality. These become the 'building blocks' referred to earlier which support the complex dynamism in interpreting the story. The narrative and

pictorial understanding of a text may therefore serve as a key to unpicking such spirituality in picture books.

Thirdly, empathy was often a key feature of children's responses to dilemmas and difficult situations in the picture books and was articulated through statements of personal analogy. Emotional bonds were formed between the children and the characters in the picture books. Children's responses from an emotional, moral and intellectual perspective appear to confirm the Vygotskian concept of the 'interrelationship between the intellect and emotion, a dynamic system in which the affective and the intellect unite' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.37).

Finally, and importantly, their study reflected the way in which language and dialogue played a key role in the way children discussed, interpreted and constructed meaning from the books. They noted that with a strong facilitator, children were able to move from 'seeing to thinking', and through discussions were able to make changes of understanding through the 'push and pulls of other children's thinking and talk about images together' (2016, p.83). I argue that this has strong implications for the personal growth model of teaching argument outlined in chapter 1 in the way teachers use picture books.

Salient to my study are three main categories of basic literary impulses identified that guide children's responses to picture books. These have been identified as a hermeneutic impulse or desire to know; a personal impulse or need to connect the story to their own lives; and an aesthetic impulse to shape the story and make it their very own (Sipe, 2008). All of which are characteristics of supporting children's meaning making abilities.

#### 2.6.2 Empathic Responses to Picture Books

Research has indicated that picture books can support the development of children's understanding and development of empathy. This has implications for my study as data stemming from empirical research into children's spirituality (Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008) has indicated empathy as an expression of spirituality. Goodwin's (2009) research with 9-year-olds in an English primary school highlights that they empathised with characters in picture books and with the life-changing situations in which they found

themselves. In her study, children were also able to draw inferences from images and words to understand often complex interwoven plots and meanings. Goodwin (2009) reinforces that children move beyond the literal and can develop sophisticated meanings expressing their understanding of abstract concepts through responding to such texts.

Additionally, cross-cultural research has shown that wordless picture books can support ten to twelve-year-old immigrant children's understanding and meaning making (Arizpe et al., 2015). This project spanned the UK, Spain, US and Italy and contends that 'fiction helps navigate real-life experiences as well as the emotions of other human beings' (Arizpe et al., 2015, p.2). It highlights the significant role the teacher plays in mediating language to foster understanding and how life-to-text connections emerge. Importantly, the research posits that through reading picture books, in this case wordless picture books, 'children could talk about themselves while they talk of somebody else, a different person who goes through what they know well, loss, homesickness, isolation' (Arizpe et al., 2015, p.230).

### 2.6.3 Dialogic Space and the Co-construction of Meaning

Language as a way of mediating symbolic ideas and understanding of picture books is a key strand of this thesis. The way children collaborate and gain meaning and understanding through dialogue has been reinforced by Maine's (2015) research. Her research was carried out in an English primary school with children in two classrooms aged 6 and ten to eleven. Pairs of children responded to films and picture books (Maine, 2015). The children had been set the task of working together following guided co-constructive rules (Mercer, 2000). As in my study, storying and narrative were viewed as a way of thinking and creating meaning (Wells, 1986) and learning was viewed from a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1986).

This research indicates that meaning is further enhanced when children co-construct meaning together, through dialogue used between children, supporting them to reinterpret and offer multiple meanings (Maine, 2015). Such construction through questioning formed what Maine deemed 'chains of dialogic' thinking which supported their creative understanding (2015, p. 54). Her research reflects how children used narrative to make sense and understand the visual texts, including picture books. A salient aspect which

has parallels to my own research is how children use a dialogic space between the text and reader. Effectively, they deepen this metaphorical space by entering the world of the text to either extend the story-world and create narratives to explain it; or to deepen the space through empathising with characters or placing themselves in the scene to engage with it.

Pedagogically, exploratory talk was encouraged and flexibility and building on the ideas of others was an important tool in children making meaning together. Collaborative thinking actively allowed children to negotiate their own meanings. Of relevance here is her argument that a dialogic space adds to an understanding of the 'fluid space that exists between reader and text in the reading transaction and through raising questions and linking connections enables the creation of narratives and images to make meaning' (Maine, 2015, p.124).

#### 2.6.4 Picture Books and Philosophy: Empirical Study

I propose there are commonalities between Evans' (2016) research into children's philosophical responses to picture books and my study into spirituality. She examined children's picture books with philosophically rich content with a group of 9-year-old children from an English primary school familiar with a reader-response pedagogy which as discussed fosters and promotes exploratory talk.

Connections can be drawn between the philosophical exploration in her study and spirituality. Evans contends that 'picture books deal with philosophical issues both in direct and indirect ways' and claims that 'it is in the way in which picture books are read, considered and discussed that open up their potential for philosophical consideration and responses' (Evans, 2016, p.57). This view sits comfortably with the concept of aesthetic reading discussed in 2.4 where children's experience is valued and where a teacher's pedagogy is sensitive to a reader response stance. The issues deemed philosophical in the picture books in Evans's (2016) research, which deal with the existential musings of existence and the meaning of life, can also be considered spiritual issues. Such musings regarding individual existence fall within the spiritual sensitivity category of relational consciousness, where children relate to a relationship outside of themselves (Hay and Nye, 1998).

The use of picture books coupled with a pedagogy responsive to dialogic discussion 'allowed certain questions to be asked, questions which create enquiries and can be both intellectually liberating and emotionally disruptive' (Evans, 2016, p.65). It is worth noting that these discussions led to children being able to empathise with characters, take 'big questions' about existence and to work collaboratively (Evans, 2016). Such conclusions can, I argue, be further applied to the treatment and discussion of spirituality as well as philosophy. The choice of picture book and the mediation by the teacher seem to be pivotal for the depth of engagement realised by the children. Additionally, Evans's framework and methodology highlight the importance of open questions and wonderings to foster meaningful talk. Speculative ponderings and wonderings guided the exploratory questions asked by Evans, highlighting the importance to the children that the picture book is not a finished artefact but one to enter into through valued talk and exchange of ideas. The work further justifies a reader response theory approach to pedagogy placing the reader at the centre of the process, confirming that 'once an author has written a text s/he must give it to the readers, as it is they who interpret the work in their own way depending on what they bring to the text' (Evans, 2016, p.54).

## 2.7 Summary of Literature Review

This literature review began with a consideration of what children's spirituality looks like and how it has been identified through empirical studies. Spirituality was expressed as a relational sensitivity (Hay and Nye, 1998) towards the children themselves and towards others, and metaphor and imagination were seen to be key components in articulating an inbuilt spirituality which seeks expression (Erricker et al., 1997). In the studies, language was used as a tool to mediate understanding (Vygotsky, 1986) and to recognise and express children's spirituality. An inner worldview imbued with a strong moral compass allowed children to negotiate meaning and understanding in expressing their spirituality (Hart, 2003). In addition, story was often used as a framework from which children weaved together meaning supporting their spiritual understanding and expression (Hyde, 2008).

Empirical studies examining the relationship between children's literature and spirituality highlighted this as an under researched area, specifically to the potential role of picture fiction, with only one study using this text type (Kendall, 1999). Pike's (2000) research on responsive pedagogy was examined with reference to the second research question regarding how practitioners can support children's spirituality through the use of picture fiction. A responsive pedagogy favours a personal growth model of teaching and aesthetic reading of texts which recognise pupils' experience is significant. I also examined the power of picture books to explore meaning and the complex synergy between words and pictures (Arizpe and Styles, 2016), highlighting the potentiality they have to stimulate discussion around a range of topics such as philosophical thought (Evans, 2016) and their possibilities for spiritual expression. Having summarised the literature review I now briefly outline how my research questions specifically address the gaps identified in current research and understanding.

My initial research question began as a way of exploring the possible relationship between children's literature and spirituality. Empirical studies have tended to focus on pupils' spiritual responses to literature, principally through the use of novels and poetry (Pike, 2000; Trousdale, 2004; Posey, 2013); however, only one study has investigated the relationship between picture books and children's spirituality which was written some time ago (Kendall, 1999). The first of my research questions thus evolved from the initial exploration of the relationship between children's literature and spirituality to look specifically at how 10–11-year-olds express spirituality with picture books in the primary classroom. In contrast to Kendall's study (1999) my thesis seeks to explore this relationship with older primary school children, using very different picture books and adopting a relational theoretical framework identified by (Hay and Nye, 1998) to capture children's spirituality.

Whilst (Erricker et al. 1997; Hye and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008) have involved primary school children in their empirical research, none have focused on the deliberate use of story through picture books in an English primary classroom setting using a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology. Ng (2012) suggests that there is a place for nurturing the spiritual in primary schools but whether this can be through using picture books remains unexplored. Wintergill (2008) highlighted that secondary pupils see RE and Personal and

Social Education as subjects which foster their spirituality, yet whether this also extends to primary school pupils through using picture books is unknown. Consequently, the second research question emerged to address how the picture books themselves as a unique genre of children's literature, hitherto relatively unexplored in relation to spirituality, could be used to foster children's spiritual expressions. The review presented studies (Arizpe and Styles, 2016; Evans, 2016) exploring how children responded to picture books but not in relation to spirituality other than (Kendall, 1999). With such a paucity of literature available it seemed appropriate to focus upon children's potential spiritual responses to picture books.

However, the study would be incomplete without an exploration of the synergy between the picture books and the teacher's pedagogy in fostering spiritual expressions; a synergy yet to be explored by empirical research in the field even by the one UK study into picture books and spirituality (Kendall, 1999). Therefore, an additional strand to my second research question emerged to address exactly how the teacher's pedagogy while using the picture books were relevant in understanding children's spiritual expressions. Pike's (2000) conceptualisation of a responsive pedagogy which had supported secondary pupils' spirituality through reading poetry offered an interesting area to explore and develop further but with primary pupils and using picture books with a view to offering a practical contribution for practioners in the classroom.

Following the review of the literature my research questions evolved from a general exploration of the relationship between children's literature and spirituality to hone in and focus specifically on picture books and also to explore the teacher's use of them. The thesis aims to add to the knowledge and understanding in the field through an examination of these gaps identified through the two research questions. Having set out how my study sits in the field of children's spirituality research and how my research questions attempt to address gaps I turn to explore the methodological considerations in chapter 3.

‘The limits of my language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for’.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, (2011, p. 246).

### 3.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines and justifies the research design and methodological approach developed in order to investigate how 10 and 11-year-old pupils express their spirituality whilst engaged with picture books. As outlined in chapter 1, whilst the main research question in this doctoral study is *'How do 10-11 years old children express their spirituality whilst engaged with picture books in the primary school?'*, an additional question emerged regarding the teacher's pedagogy: *'How do picture books and the teacher's use of them support 10-11-year-old children's spirituality?'*

Recent empirical research studies into children's expressions of spirituality have adopted a hermeneutic phenomenological methodology (Hyde, 2008; Goodliff, 2013; Posey, 2013). Underpinning this is a framework which seeks to capture the essence of fundamentals of human experience and sits comfortably with researching a sensitive area such as children's spirituality. Consequently, my study seeks to use this methodological approach from a new and slightly different angle; using story and picture books as a deliberate way of understanding children's spirituality. Adopting this approach supports hermeneutic reflection and interpretation in the analysis of data leading to a rich understanding of children's experiences.

In Section 3.2 I outline the theoretical framework underpinning the choices of a qualitative study and my ontological and epistemological positions. Section 3.3 discusses the ways research rigour and transferability issues were addressed through my choice of a case study design. Section 3.4 explains how issues of credibility, rigour and trustworthiness were navigated in the use of a qualitative study. The ethical procedures followed, including discussion of the research context and ethical consideration of my power position as headteacher and exploring such a sensitive topic is set out in section 3.5. In Section 3.6 I discuss the choice of data collection tools and section 3.7 provides detail on the data analysis process and use of hermeneutic phenomenology. A summary is provided in Section 3.8.



### 3.2 Theoretical Framework

In this section I qualify my choice of a qualitative study through justifying the epistemological and ontological position which situates my study in a qualitative paradigm. My research aims to explore the tensions that exist between Ofsted's (2019) policy document which inspects primary schools and their statutory duty to foster children's spirituality. Yet, how this is achieved in the classroom context is disputed and problematic for teachers. Consequently, this research necessitated a methodology which would answer my research questions and allow children to express their spirituality in their own words and to reveal how the picture books themselves and teacher's pedagogy allowed for spiritual expression. The sensitive nature of the topic and the potentiality for a plurality of responses confirmed a qualitative study as an appropriate way to capture children's responses.

#### 3.2.1 Epistemology and Ontology

Research design is influenced and interpreted by epistemological (the nature of and how knowledge is known) and ontological (how reality is perceived) assumptions (Creswell, 2013). In this thesis, the reader response theory positions the reader at the heart of the process of understanding. Hermeneutic phenomenology interprets the phenomenon of being in the world. This study adopts a social-constructivist approach to how children learn and understand (Vygotsky, 1986) and how children understand and express their spirituality in the primary classroom, where meaning is negotiated through language and story (Bruner, 1986). The pupils and the class teacher are perceived therefore as active participants in their own learning and understanding; they write their own narrative of understanding and create their own worldview (Bruner, 1986). Pedagogy and learning are activated through talk and the social interaction of children with other children and the class teacher. Layers of meaning emerge through socially negotiating understanding and through language mediation (Vygotsky, 1986). Pupils and the teachers themselves are recognised as creators and co-constructors of knowledge. A constructionist epistemology therefore underpins my research, where 'meaningful reality is contingent upon human practices, [classroom discussion] being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings [children and teachers] and developed in a social context' (such as a primary classroom) (Crotty, 2013, p42). This suggests that knowledge is not found outside of

personal understanding as an objective truth to be discovered, but rather resides in the individual and in the group as it is co-constructed.

This epistemological assumption sits comfortably with researching such an individualised and nuanced phenomenon as the relationship between picture books and children's spirituality: as children interact with the stories in picture books their meanings are both objective and subjective and their 'objectivity and subjectivity are indissolubly bound up with each other' (Crotty, 2013, p48). In this study, researching primary pupils' expressions of spirituality through engagement with literature and the class teacher, I understand that (epistemology) knowledge and (ontology) reality are socially constructed and embedded and expressed through a narrative way of thinking. The children will develop their own ontological and epistemological story of the world and their place in it (Bruner, 1986).

### Interpretive Paradigm

Underpinning each research study is a set of beliefs and assumptions that the researcher holds, affecting the way the research questions are explored and answered; these form a particular research paradigm (Creswell, 2013). A research paradigm is:

'A way of looking at a research phenomena, a world view, a view of what counts as accepted or correct scientific knowledge or way of working, an accepted model or pattern'

(Kuhn, 1962, in Cohen et al., 2011).

Having identified the phenomenon to research and the research questions I sought to discover, 'it was necessary to consider a variety of paradigms and to forge a methodology to meet the particular needs and purpose of this research' (Crotty, 2013, p.14). A positivist paradigm suggests that there is an objective and scientific explanation (Cohen et al., 2011). To adopt such a paradigm would result in an acknowledgement of an epistemological viewpoint that knowledge is set and objective for the children in the study to discover, and that ontologically the world and its meaning are objective to the individual (Creswell, 2013).

In contrast to the positivistic paradigm, an interpretivist approach attempts to understand and explain human and social reality. Reflecting on the nature of this research, to explore spiritual expressions with children aged 10-11 years in a primary school setting, an interpretivist paradigm supports my previously outlined epistemological and ontological views that argue meaning and thought are developed socially and co-constructed

(Vygotsky, 1986, Bruner, 1986). As such I locate my research within an interpretative paradigm.

### 3.2.2 Qualitative Study

Having located my study in an interpretative paradigm the choice between a qualitative and quantitative study was required. Quantitative studies seek validity of results using controllability in an objective and results driven process. This contrasts with a qualitative study which allows for participants subjective experiences to be more fully understood (Cohen et al., 2011). Consequently, my study, located in an interpretative paradigm and considering the nature of the subject would lend itself to a more qualitative study:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world... and consists of a set of interpretive material practices that make the world visible. ... This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring them.

(Denzin & Lincoln, 2011, p.3)

As I am researching the relationship between spirituality and picture books in the primary school, I situate myself in the social world of the classroom with a conviction that children create and gain knowledge together through social construction, and an awareness that a qualitative study will allow me to interpret how meanings are generated, discussed and perceived with 10-11-year-old children. I seek to make sense of how they perceive the world through multiple methods. In this way I am able to give a voice to participants in the study reflecting their reality of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). Therefore, to explore the phenomenon of children's spirituality, a qualitative study seemed most suitable.

### 3.3 Case Study

In order to explore the children's experiences and provide an answer to the overarching research question 'How do 10-11-year-old children express their spirituality in the primary school?', the research was to take place within an interpretivist paradigm, but it was also important to choose a suitable approach to respond to the research questions.

Case study research involves a study of a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context (Yin, 2018) and like Creswell, (2013) and Denzin & Lincoln, (2011) I see a case study as both

a type of methodology and a product of the inquiry itself. Yin (2018) contends that case study designs are particularly effective in supporting 'how' and 'why' questions and are useful in educational research; 'The hallmark of a good case study is that it presents an in-depth understanding of the case.... And involves a description of the case' (Creswell, 2013, p.98). Geertz (1973) argues that one of the positive features of case study research is the amount of 'thick description' that can be generated from research participants' lived experiences where the researcher becomes part of the experience.

One of the difficulties in conducting a case study is ensuring there are clear parameters in the case under investigation (Yin, 2018). As both my research questions are related to 'how' children express their spirituality in a classroom situation this fits with real-life phenomena in a social context. Case studies also give a unique example of real people in everyday situations and one of their strengths is that they observe effects in a real-life context (Cohen et al, 2010, p.289). How children in a London primary school engage with literature and express spirituality and how picture books and the teacher's use of them fulfils the category of real people and context; a case study seems able to fulfil the aims of my research questions.

Yin (2018) identifies three types of case study, exploratory descriptive and explanatory. An exploratory case study can add further information to empirical studies and theories in exploring a real-life context. A second issue arises as to whether the case study should be single or multiple design. Yin (2018) contends that single case study designs 'can represent a significant contribution to knowledge and theory building by confirming, challenging or extending theory' (Yin, 2018, p.49). However, he cautions against the vulnerability of a single case study and how this can lead to misrepresentation and lack of generalisability (Yin, 2018).

For my research an exploratory case study seemed appropriate to investigate the relationship between children's picture books and spirituality. A single-case study design allows for an intense exploration, and as a clear case study had been identified, a classroom study of children's picture books with clear boundaries, this would provide detailed and thick data which could contribute to knowledge and theory. To mitigate criticism and concern around single case studies, I adopt Yin's (2018) rationale of common sense for single case study design where concentrating on a single case can capture the conditions and experiences of situations.

For this thesis, I adopt a single, narrow yet deep, exploratory case study of three children aged 10-11 years old in a London primary school.

At the primary school where the research was conducted, bi-weekly extended writing lessons formed part of the English curriculum. During these sessions multi-layered picture books were selected independently by teachers and shared with the class. The stories were discussed with children who then composed their own creative stories at length, loosely based on the picture book themes and ideas. Extended writing lessons were designed to foster children's own narrative voice and stories were valued for engagement and creative content and not the traditional technical aspects of literacy explored elsewhere in the school's curriculum. For the study three picture books were selected by myself as researcher in conversation with the teacher. The three children in the case study were video recorded in the classroom during the three extended writing sessions where the teacher presented the three picture books to the whole class. Following each of the three extended writing lessons the three children were audio recorded in semi-structured group interviews with myself as researcher.

### 3.3.1 Selection and Justification of Picture books

I now consider how and why the picture books in the study were selected. In this study I adopted a holistic view of spirituality and did not seek to select books for their potential spirituality. The picture books were neither religious nor considered overtly spiritual literature or texts (Roth & Thomas, 2013), but rather they were picture books used in the classroom in which the research was conducted. I selected many possible titles and discussed these with colleagues and the class teacher who was part of the research study. I illustrate the thought processes that formed part of the selection of books, with an extract from my research journal below:

I spoke with Mr Cordopatri today regarding the picture books on the curriculum for year 6. We looked at a range of books that I owned, he had in his collection and the school library... I asked him do you think any of the texts we are looking at are particularly spiritual as I want to keep them as neutral as possible. I showed him the BLBHS and said this does mention heaven but almost in a light hearted way and in no way states that this is real or religious. We looked at a range of titles viewing the pictures and the text... I spoke to Daniel (headteacher colleague) about this and he reminded me that my desire was to test out whether any picture book could support children's expression of spirituality and not one that was considered as spiritual. I decided on the BLBHS as it discusses many social and emotional issues for children such as loneliness and friendships; *The Island* as this is a text used in the final year of the writing curriculum as it has some challenging themes about racism, and the *Harmonica*, a less well known text but one that fits in with the children's historical World War II study. There are many titles I am sad not to include such as *Rose Blanche* by Roberto Innocenti and *How to live for Ever* by Colin Thompson, they are favourite books of mine to teach and therefore I avoid these as I might be too close to the texts and influence or project my meaning and understanding of the texts. I hope these texts will stimulate conversation...

Research Journal Entry May 14<sup>th</sup> 2016

Extract 3A – Research Journal Entry Regarding Selection of Picture Books for Use in the Study.

Eliminating complete bias in the choice of picture books was unavoidable, yet through reflexivity in my research journal I argue that I was aware of any unconscious-bias and through discussion with colleagues eliminated this as far as possible. The picture books represent a selection of the texts children in Year Six, the final year of primary school, would have studied at some point in the curriculum. I offer a summary of the plot of the three books below.

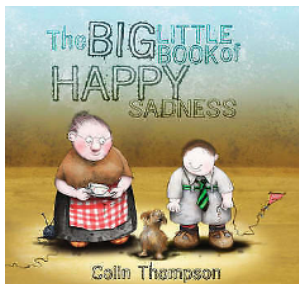
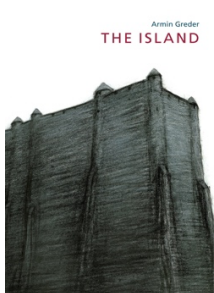

| The Big Little Book of Happy Sadness by Colin Thompson   | The Island by Armin Greder   | The Harmonica by Tony Johnston  |
|--|--|---|
|   |   |    |
| This text charts the history of a lonely boy George who misses his parents and lives with his grandmother. One Friday, with the weekend stretching before him he stumbles across a three-legged dog Jeremy in a dog shelter. Jeremy appears even lonelier than him. Their lives change for the better as they begin a happy life together. | This book deals with the issue of immigration, racism and xenophobia through the eyes of a stranger who lands on an island. Cross-cultural tensions arise across society leading to a violent hatred. The book is starkly illustrated in a sombre expressionist style reminiscent of Munch's 'The Scream'. | This text presents the poignant story of a Jewish family torn apart by World War II and the Nazis. A Jewish boy confronts the horrors of life in a concentration camp where he survives only by playing Schubert on his harmonica. The beauty of music and the horror of war come together in sharp contrast. |

Table 3A – Picture Books Summary

### 3.3.2 Generalisability

One of the criticisms levelled against case study research is its potential limitations of generalisability (Cohen et al., 2011). It is argued that carrying out a single case study can lead to bias on the part of the researcher with preconceived knowledge and ideas. Yin (2018), however, argues that a single case study carried out in a real-life context such as my research in a primary school can lead to context specific generalisations, yet these can be linked to theoretical positions, which mitigate any loss in generalisation. The opportunity to research spirituality in a primary school could produce insights which are beneficial to the research field and may also enable the researcher to influence policy and offer support for practice.

### 3.3.3 Reflexivity

As qualitative research is heavily influenced by the researcher being part of the context and building up a relationship with the participants, their pre-conceived ideas or understanding can prove problematic. I was particularly conscious of this potential bias as I was a

Headteacher in the school where I carried out the research and knew the children and families professionally. From the outset of the research process, I kept a research journal which was designed as a method of maintaining a distance from the research through reflexivity. Through this I was able to keep perspective and challenge myself on any potential unconscious bias (Cohen et al., 2011).

Children discussed BLBHS today and I was pleased and even delighted with their comments. I was however hoping that the children would have concentrated on a subtle image in the book where the character is perceived as an angel. This would have led to a stimulating discussion. I have seen children pick up on this in previous readings of the book. I had to leave the conversation go in the direction of what the children perceived and wanted to talk about. I realise that this can be frustrating yet essential to ensure my own views are kept out of the process as far as possible.

Research Journal Entry June 29<sup>th</sup> 2016

#### Extract 3B – Research Journal Entry Regarding Potential Bias

The research journal entries allowed me to reflect on the challenges of researching a sensitive issue in the school where I worked. This level of reflexivity allowed me to be aware of any potential bias and pre-existing knowledge I had around picture books and spirituality from selecting the participants to data collection and data analysis.

However, reflection on my research journal entries also suggests the advantages of conducting research in my own school. I had already built a relationship with the children, parents and teachers. This, I argue, allowed the children to be open and comfortable from the beginning of the process which may have led to more intense and insightful reflections in the data. I understood the picture books used as part of the primary curriculum and the pedagogy used in the classrooms.

#### 3.4 Qualitative research - Rigour and Trustworthiness

Qualitative researchers strive for deep understanding of an area through spending prolonged and extensive time in the field with participants and need to ensure that the study has both rigour and trustworthiness. Lincoln and Guba (1985) propose four criteria for establishing trustworthiness: credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.



#### 3.4.1 Credibility:

Lincoln and Guba (1985) have identified a set of checks to ensure credibility of research findings: prolonged engagement, persistent observation, triangulation and peer checking. 'These perspectives view qualitative validation in terms of quantitative equivalents' (Creswell, 2013, p.244). As a headteacher at the school where I carried out the research, I naturally had a prolonged engagement at the school and with the children. The research was carried out in the second year of my headship and I knew the children. Before the research process had started, I had often taught in the class and children were familiar with me being present. I observed and recorded all three lessons and audio recorded all the group interviews. From the three observed lessons and group interviews, as well as my research journal notes, I had a considerable amount of data. I used two different data collection tools, observation and interview, which allowed me to triangulate and cross reference statements and discussions. I discussed findings with the class teacher and also took part in research conversations with my doctoral colleagues and supervisors. Additionally, I prepared a symposium research paper to discuss at a conference on children's spirituality. At a practitioners' level I also presented at several schools leading training days using some of the data captured. This allowed a critique of my findings from different sources.

#### 3.4.2 Transferability

A challenge of qualitative studies and case studies as in my research is the nature of transferability and how results in my specific context can be transferred to other settings. I argue that the context-specific nature of my research can be applied to other schools in similar contexts and year groups. In addition, generalisations can also be made to the theoretical positions identified and linked to the results where the age and context is different. The research can also transfer to impact other schools at their own school policy level. I intend to use the new understandings about picture books as tools to support children's expressions of spirituality in my own primary school which is in a different context where I am now headteacher and link schools within the borough.

#### 3.4.3 Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability of the research has been addressed through setting out the rationale for decisions made during the research processes. I have considered and explained all

methodological decisions in this chapter. Confirmability in this research was provided by being highly self-reflective and offering a transparent account for the systematic scrutiny for each stage of the research process; within this thesis an 'audit trail' of the steps taken at different points is illustrated through tables and diagrams of the research process.

### 3.5 Ethical Sensitivities

The research project was carried out with children in the final year of primary school, the primary school where I was a Headteacher and as such several ethical procedures needed to be considered.

#### 3.5.1 Sensitive Area of Research

All educational research can be argued to be sensitive and the question is necessarily one of degree (Cohen & Manion, 2011). The degree of sensitivity in my research is heightened by several factors. Firstly, the vulnerability of the participants in the research, 10-11-year-old primary school pupils; secondly, the 'powerful' position of myself as Headteacher of the school where the pupils attended school and as the researcher; and thirdly the highly personalised and sensitive nature of the topic being researched, spirituality, which is contentious. Many children, sensitive to societal taboos around religion or mystical experiences, can be rendered voiceless as they remain secretive of their spiritual experiences (Adams et al; 2008).

I discussed with colleagues the prospect of conducting research at my own school and shared various problematic issues pertaining to power relationships. I approached a class teacher colleague and floated the idea of research with his class. I discussed informally the children in his class as I had been regularly teaching them creative writing and had built a teacher, as well as Headteacher, relationship with them. In turn I approached some of the parents in the class regarding the possibility of conducting research in the class; all were positive but felt they would need further information regarding the spiritual aspect of the research. Again, I was mindful of the power relationships and parents feeling compelled to agree. I issued them with detailed information and reminded them this was a completely free choice (see Appendix 2).

### 3.5.2 Research Context:

The research project was carried out at a West London Primary School. At the time of the research I had been Headteacher at the school, which admitted two forms of children from Nursery, (3-11-year-olds) for two years. The school attracted children from a wide range of socio-economic backgrounds and numbered approximately 400 pupils. I wanted to explore and investigate children's experience of both picture books and spirituality at the end of primary school before embarking on their secondary education. The research was carried out over a period of three weeks in the Summer Term of 2016. Before the research began, I had met parents once and children to discuss the research and ensure all were aware of the ethical considerations. To protect the children's anonymity, the name of the school is omitted from the thesis and the children and teacher names are replaced by pseudonyms.

### 3.5.3 Ethical Approval

The potential sensitivity arises in my research where spirituality may be viewed as probing into the belief structure or religious area of their lives, or conversely that discussing spirituality with a child where there is not a belief system may prove difficult, uncomfortable or problematic. Renzetti and Lee (1993) also explicitly mention intrusion into private lives and religious practices as a taboo area which firmly rests within the description of sensitive research. Experience from designing and researching an initial study highlighted the need for more consideration of the sensitivity of such a research area, as 'doing research is not merely a matter of designing a project but also a matter of interpersonal relationships and the delicate forging and renegotiating of personal relationships' (Manion and Cohen, 2011, p.166).

### 3.5.4 Positionality as Headteacher and Researcher

As a researcher and also Headteacher at my school clear difficulties arise in terms of power and positionality. Powerful people are those who exert control and have responsibility for large numbers of people (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Children may feel vulnerable or uncomfortable in the presence of their Headteacher and may feel uncomfortable being interviewed, obliged to give consent to participate, or too shy to document their true feelings in response to questions, particularly in response to the theme of spirituality.

Children may feel powerless and insecure in the presence of the researcher too or may feel compelled to say what they think the researcher wants. Acknowledging this power relationship at the outset of my research design allowed me to take account of the ethical dimension to this sensitive research area, as Renzetti and Lee (1993) state ethics has to do with the application of a system of moral principles, to promote the good, to be respectful and fair.

### 3.5.5 Personal View on Children's Literature and Spiritual Belief

As discussed above my position as Headteacher has been outlined to consider issues of any potential unconscious bias and how this would be mitigated. I discuss my own personal view on children's literature and my spiritual belief below as this may have influenced the study. Through clearly articulating and acknowledging my own beliefs as transparently stated below, I could be sensitively aware of how this, if at all, could affect my interpretations and results. I was able to refer back to this at times as a point of reference during the research process to facilitate self-reflection as a researcher.

My Perspective on Literature: I view the experience of engaging with literature as extremely positive and believe that literature has a special place in the classroom. I feel warm and protected by the words of a good book and story. I am an avid reader and I learn a lot about myself from the events and stories of others. As a child I loved reading and found the process to be happy and exciting. I am considered by family as a bookworm and literature has always played a formidable part in my life. To read is to set my mind free and escape into an imaginary world...

Researcher View on Children's Literature

I consider myself to be a deeply spiritual person yet I do not express this through a specific religious framework. With a strong belief in God as a higher entity, praying and meditation form part of my daily life. Spirituality is the motivation for my life from which everything else flows such as fostering humility, kindness and being of service to those who enter my life. Concern for humanity, peace and harmony also form part of my belief. I consider my career as a form of service and a strong part of my life's purpose.

Researcher Personal Spiritual Belief

My submission to the Open University Ethics Committee (HREC) was successful (HREC 2016 2295 Jones, Appendix 1). The BERA (2011) guidelines were considered and followed fully regarding ethical considerations I outline below; these have since been updated (BERA, 2018).

I was keen to attract a range of children for the study ensuring a gender and diversity balance, along with children who identify both as religious and non-religious. I reflected upon the issue of purposively sampling the class of thirty children. I spoke with the Class teacher and asked his opinion on children he felt might feel happy to talk and not inhibited by a research process. He suggested 3 children who I introduce below in Table 3B, who I felt represented a balanced sample of children for the study. Before proceeding with this sample, I sought to address the issue of the gatekeeper. Gatekeepers control access to an institution and play a significant role in managing risk to the institution (Alderson and Morrow, (2011). As the Headteacher, the role of gatekeeper would ordinarily be myself, so to overcome this I spoke with the Chair of Governors (Strategic Lead of the governing body of the school) and explained the research and she endorsed it having viewed the HREC ethics letter and communication to parents I had prepared in anticipation (see Appendix 1 and 4).

I attach a brief background to the participants; all names have been changed.

| Participants Name | Background Information   |
|-------------------|--|
| Harry             | Harry is a 10-year-old boy, the middle child of three. He is half Australian and has an older brother and younger sister. He identifies as not having a specific religious identity. He and his parents were excited to be part of the research project.   |
| Fatima            | Fatima is also the middle child of three, with an older brother at secondary school and a younger brother at this primary school. She identifies as a Muslim and wears a hijab and is proud of her faith. Both parents were keen to discuss the nature of what spirituality meant for the research before giving consent.  |
| Iris              | Iris had been at the school since nursery but had spent periods living in Australia before returning. She did not identify with any religion but this did not presume that she had no religious affiliation or identity. Her parents were keen to participate and didn't seek any follow up or further information regarding the definition or concept of spirituality being used in the research. |

Table 3B – Children's Background Details

### 3.5.6 Informed Consent

The power relationship of myself as an 'insider' in my school researching the pupils and the class teacher can be problematic for the researcher (Simmons, 2007). I had been aware of this from the inception of the research idea and this required sensitive and careful handling. I decided to accept the class teacher's recommendation of children who would

be confident to participate in the study. I approached the parents and carers and pupils in a meeting and offered an explanation about the research and handed them the Child Participation Letter and Parents Participation Letter for Consent (see Appendix 3 and 4). Bucknall (2014) argues that offering participants a choice that is clearly set out is important to a researcher's ethical behaviour when researching with children and young people. I outlined in the letter that I was talking to them as a doctoral researcher and not as Headteacher and clearly stated that refusing to participate would not be detrimental to them. I included an explanation sheet regarding the content of the picture books, along with a definition of spirituality. Families were free to go away and think about this. I only received one follow up from a family seeking further explanation on spirituality. All children and families were happy to take part in the research.

I needed to confirm the research proposal with the year 6 class teacher, Mr Cordopatri (pseudonym). I was aware of the power relationship involved in effectively becoming an 'observer' in my own institution and broached the sensitive issue with him. I discussed and presented him with a Teacher Research Letter (see Appendix 6 and 7). Cohen et al. (2011) assert that powerful people, of which a Headteacher is such a person in their own educational establishment, frequently explore research on their own territory and terms. I was mindful that the class teacher would not feel obliged to participate and I allowed a few weeks after initially approaching him about the matter to consider if he wanted to take part. I explained how the lesson observations over a three-week period would involve myself as a participant observer in the lessons and how I would blend as far as possible into the background (Simmons, 2007). I explained issues around informed consent and he agreed to be part of the process. I further explained issues of data protection, that pseudonyms would be used throughout, and that the research would not affect school life or his position at school.

### 3.5.7 Children's Voice and Rights

The children were at the heart of my study and research questions, and as such would be at the centre of my ethical approaches to ensuring their voice was recognised through informed consent. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Article 42, guides research with children under '3 P's': provision, protection and participation rights (Alderson, 2014, p.88). To this end, I ensured I had a follow up meeting with all children before the research started and read through the sheet they had signed, explaining that

they were able to leave the research project at any point during and after the project finished. I outlined their contacts as myself, their class teacher and their parents. The rights of the children in the study were integral to ensuring that their voices were heard regarding decisions that affected them, such as participating in the research and information that was held about them. This was further articulated by BERA (2011) privileging the informed consent of children. As 10-11-year-olds they seemed to understand this information and all agreed to participate.

Issues around confidentiality and privacy were fully explained and outlined. In the letter and research pack sent to parents and children it set out that all data would be stored carefully and securely and that all names would be anonymised. Participants were informed that data would be carefully and securely stored and destroyed after the research process is completed (BERA, 2011).

### 3.6 Data Collection

In this section I describe the process of my data collection, the methods used and justification for this. I begin with a brief outline of a pilot study carried out before embarking on this research.

#### 3.6.1 Pilot Stage of the Research Process

A pilot study was carried out before commencing the main research study, in February 2014, at a large primary school in Bristol where I was then a Deputy Head Teacher. The study investigated 8-9-year-old children's responses to spirituality through novels and picture books. The study allowed me to test out both the methodology and the theoretical framework. The research confirmed that observations and group interviews were successful research methods in allowing children to discuss cooperatively and to see them in their naturalistic environment of the classroom. To contextualise and understand the subtle and intricate nature of spirituality from the children's experiences, the three research participants allowed me to enter more deeply into hermeneutic reflection and interpretation to describe phenomenologically the pupils' experience of picture books and spirituality.

As a result of the pilot I discovered that the picture books more than the novels seemed to attract the children's curiosity and interest, so, with the paucity of research into picture

books, I decided to focus the research on this text type. The data revealed many interesting aspects of how children's literature offered an exploratory space through which children could express their spirituality. However, the question as to how this happened and the role the teacher played was missing. I therefore reoriented a secondary question to explore teacher pedagogy around picture books which would provide a fuller response to the policy and practice tensions outlined in chapter 1.

### 3.6.2 Data Collection Process:

The thesis' data was collected during the Summer Term of 2016, from June 29<sup>th</sup> to July 29<sup>th</sup>. I blocked out a day each week to observe a creative writing lesson where a picture book would be used, followed by a group interview in the afternoon. Between research days I completed a research journal and reflected on events. During periods of research, I spoke with Mr Cordopatri informally about his observations and reflections, some of which are included in my journal. Table 3C outlines the research period and data collection methods

| Week   | Method  | Observation Notes | Interviews | Digital Sound Files Transcribed | Reflective Journal | Field Notes |
|--------|---|-------------------|------------|---------------------------------|--------------------|-------------|
| Week 1 | Naturalistic Observation of Classroom Lesson followed by Group Interview using <i>The Big, Little Book of Happy Sadness (BLBHS)</i> | ✓                 | ✓          | ✓                               | ✓                  | ✓           |
| Week 2 | Naturalistic Observation of Classroom Lesson using the picture book <i>The Island</i>   | ✓                 | ✓          | ✓                               | ✓                  | ✓           |
| Week 3 | Naturalistic Observation of Classroom Lesson using the picture book <i>The Harmonica</i>  | ✓                 | ✓          | ✓                               | ✓                  | ✓           |

Table 3C- Data Collection Methods



### 3.6.3 Observations

Yin (2018) argues that observations are an essential ingredient of good case study research as the researcher is able to be part of the phenomenon being investigated. The pilot study stage confirmed the usefulness of this method of data collection in producing useful contextual data. A total of three hours of observational data was collected by video camera set up to capture the three children and the Class teacher reading the picture books in a whole classroom setting. Each creative writing lesson lasted roughly one hour. In adopting observations as a tool for investigating in this research I was guided by my research questions which seeks to explore children's expressions of spirituality whilst engaged with picture books but also the teacher's use of them. 'Close observation requires the researcher to enter the person's life world and participate in it and to gather anecdotal elements that would feed into to the exploration of the experience' (Van Manen, 1990, p. 68). Therefore, I positioned myself with the three participants on a group and was keen to oscillate between the role of observer and participant, mindful to maintain 'a certain orientation of reflexivity since the best way to enter a person's life world is to participate in it' (Van Manen, 1990, p169).

In the pilot study I had hoped to video pupils' responses to studying the texts, however, some parents were not favourable to this and time constraints did not allow for further exploration of the matter. Therefore for this thesis, being as closely involved in the observation as possible was essential to gain glimpses of the pupils' responses to the texts and especially the picture book fiction. Consequently, a small camera was set up on a tripod as unobtrusively as possible for the duration of the three classroom observation sessions. In addition to the camera, I carried out my own detailed observation during each of the three sessions documenting significant moments. The video camera was designed to capture moments I had not been aware of and to triangulate with my field notes, observation and group interview notes. As Cohen et al. posit 'a camera in a classroom is never neutral as it has its field and focus pre-determined' (2011, p. 530). Therefore, my observation notes were useful in adding to any moments not captured by the camera. The video recorded the three children's responses along with the teacher's interaction with them and how he talked to the class as a whole.

I recorded the responses of pupils to collect the anecdotes and responses of the children's experiences, and immediately following the observation I wrote up my level of participation and personal thoughts which formed part of my reflective journal, which has been on-going throughout the research process. As a result of a video camera being set up in the classroom for the main study, which viewed the three participants only and the teacher, I afforded myself the freedom to be able to observe key moments in the pupils' responses such as body language and facial expressions, silences, sadness, movement and hesitation. I acknowledge that inevitably there were moments that potentially have been lost in the process of observing the more subtle aspects of pupils' reactions.

All observational data from the camera was recorded and made into a video file which was transcribed along with my observational field notes to create interesting areas to explore. The video transcripts were analysed several times and along with my observational notes and research journal entries. From this I isolated and clustered similar meanings together to create significant statements which emerged into themes. Within each theme I was able to enter into a hermeneutic conversation with the data to reflect and interpret upon the children and teacher's responses. My principal aim was to appreciate how the children's language reflected and interpreted their spirituality and the way the teacher used the picture books. The video and observational notes were useful in capturing this and also, to a lesser extent, recognition of the non-verbal elements of children's and teachers' reactions and explanations to the story. I acknowledge that observational data is highly flexible to the social context of the researcher and can complement other forms of data such as semi structured interviews to gain greater clarity (Cohen et al., 2011).

#### 3.6.4 Semi-Structured Interviews

A key decision in the study involved the selection of either to conduct group or individual interviews. In this section I outline the rationale for selecting group interviews and the inherent challenges involved with this approach. Following each of the classroom observations three semi-structured group interviews were conducted by myself as researcher with the three participants only. The interviews were recorded on a digital voice recorder, saved as an audio file and later transcribed. Within the hermeneutic tradition the interview serves very specific purposes. To allow a space for children to discuss their inner

experience and thoughts and feelings when engaging with literature; and to 'explore and gather experiential narrative material which will serve as a resource for a richer and deeper understanding of the phenomenon of human spirituality' (Van Manen, 1990, p.68).

A group interview structure facilitated pupils talk more freely and be less of a daunting process in light of the power position as Headteacher discussed above and offered a construct through which pupils could support each other with their views and thoughts. Creswell (2013) illustrates the consideration needed in deciding between the types of interviews relating to the research question aims. Interviewing on an individual basis may have had the benefit of exploring deeper personal issues that children may have felt more ready to express in a one-on-one situation. However, the data analysed reflects that the group interviews were viewed as a positive experience and children were able to hear their peers' views and often disagreed with or confirmed each other's feelings and expressions of spirituality. Cohen et al. (2011) argue that 'group interviewing enables children to challenge each other in a way that would not be possible in a one-to-one adult-child interview' (p. 433). As outlined earlier in this chapter, the study is informed by a social constructivist epistemology where children socially negotiate meaning, and a group setting therefore seemed appropriate. As three children made up the sample, I considered this to be a small enough group to facilitate all to express their personal opinions. The interviews were anticipated to last around forty minutes but often ran to an hour as children were excited and wanted their turn to offer their views. Pupils were keen to speak; however, I realised the need to ensure a balance of all views and prompted and encouraged one child in the study to add to the discussion.

The semi-structured interviews were designed to allow children to reveal in the most naturalistic ways their thoughts and feelings in response to the picture book stories selected. The questions were changed more than once before the research as I was mindful of the need not to guide the pupils too much and the revised questions offered space and prompting to explore their experiences such as 'I wonder what ....?' and 'Tell me how you feel about ....?' (Berryman, 1993). This allowed children effectively to be in control of their own discussion and what they felt they needed or wanted to say, and I noted the occasions where I needed to be silent.

I acknowledge the potential challenges in conducting group interviews with children and reflected upon this in my research journal where I discussed the possible difficulties and the ways I could mitigate these. Arksey and Knight (1999) highlight the limitations of group interviews and how participants can dominate the discussion or be reticent with their views. Also, that a groupthink response may emerge and how the interviewer may be required to handle a plurality of responses. As reflected in my research journal, I mitigated these factors through ensuring with the small group of participants that each had equal opportunities to speak and to be respectful of each other's views. The issue of the trustworthiness of interpreting children's responses in group interview situations can emerge, and Arksey and Knight (1999) posit that a combination of methods such as using writing and art alongside group interviews can be useful to support the trustworthiness of participants responses. Although the methods used in this thesis are defended and enable the research questions to be fully answered, analysing the children's stories following each observation and group interview may have added a further layer of trustworthiness in interpreting the children's responses. I discuss this further in the limitations of the study in chapter 6.

### 3.7 Data Analysis

Having outlined the data collection tools utilised I now address how the data was analysed. Having read widely around children's spirituality, and as discussed in chapter 2, most empirical studies have tended to focus on a grounded theory approach to analysing children's spirituality (Erricker et al., 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998). However, the hermeneutic phenomenological approach followed in more recent studies (e.g. Hyde 2008; Goodliff, 2013; Posey 2013) exploring children's spirituality increasingly seemed more appropriate for my investigation to explore how children expressed spirituality whilst engaged with picture books. I outline my rationale below.

#### 3.7.1 Hermeneutic Phenomenology

Phenomenology is the study of a phenomenon and hermeneutics is the interpretation of meaning, therefore hermeneutic phenomenology is the study of an experience and its meanings. Research into spirituality, being such an elusive and sensitive subject,

necessitated a theoretical approach that would be sensitive to capture essences of meanings: 'The purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something' in this study the relationship between children's engagement with picture books and spirituality (Van Manen, 1990).

Phenomenology has its origins in the work of Husserl (1976) who framed it primarily in philosophical terms, specifically as the study of "essences", of transcendental, idea structures of consciousness. Heidegger (1980) placed the art of 'being' at the centre of phenomenology known as ontology. Heidegger explains that our ontology, or being in the world, presents us with a fundamentally "hermeneutic situation". This is a situation in which we are 'compelled to ask questions about ourselves, about the nature of the hermeneutic situation itself and about who we should be and become in it' (Heidegger cited in Henriksson, 2012, p2). Hermeneutics is the interpretation of meaning that is not fixed and unitary but is always open to new and continuous meaning.

In this study I use hermeneutic phenomenology as a tool to interpret and reflect on the data to reveal layers of meaning and understanding. This offers opportunities to develop theory into an understanding of how children's spirituality using picture books finds expression in everyday life in the classroom through conscious interaction with the world and experiences around them. Guided by Van Manen, I am aware that 'lived life is always more complex than any explanation meaning can give' (1990, p. 8). I now turn to explore how hermeneutic phenomenological reflection and interpretation is used to analyse the data.

### 3.7.2 The Process of Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

In this thesis, significant statements are developed from the rich data of observations and group interviews and used as a starting point to generate themes. Meanings emerge through hermeneutic reflection and interpretation of the children's experience of each theme and presented in the form of children's texts. From the significant amount of rich data generated, thematic analysis gives shape to the shapeless (Van Manen, 1990) through isolating significant statements into themes, allows the data to become objects of reflection. Van Manen (1990) argues that writing texts should be orientated to the research

question or phenomenon being researched, in this research, children's spirituality and picture books. Texts should be deep to aid a fuller understanding and contain rich, thick descriptions to reflect upon the phenomenon. In the following section I explain how the themes emerged from isolating statements and phrases from the transcripts of children's interviews, observations and my reflective research journal.

Having transcribed the group interview data and the video recorded observational data, I read and re-read the transcripts several times to develop an understanding of the children's experiences when children were engaged in reading picture books in the classroom (Van Manen, 1990). To better understand and interpret the data showing the 'experiential structures of children's experience (I needed to take control of) and order the research and writing' (Van Manen, 1990, p.79). One way to do this in the hermeneutic phenomenological tradition is to conduct a thematic analysis. In reading and reflecting upon the transcripts I was attempting to 'gather' and bring understandings of how children experienced their spirituality, how the picture books and the teacher's use of them offered opportunities for spiritual reflection, and attempting to 'unearth a telling or something meaningful... something thematic in the experiential accounts of the experience' (Van Manen, 1990, p.79). As part of the tradition in hermeneutic phenomenology research, I reflected upon what the experience of a theme essentially meant and I arrived at the understanding of a theme as the 'experience of focus, of meaning, the sense we are able to make of something' (Van Manen, 1990, p.87). From the reading and re-reading of transcripts, I began isolating sentences and words which appeared frequently, and used them as points of meaning, which allowed me to reflect on the essence of the experience; from this, significant statements began to emerge.

The thematic isolation approach to interpretation and reflection has limitations in that 'no conceptual formulation or single statement can possibly capture the full mystery of the experience a thematic phrase only serves to point to, to allude to, or hint at an aspect of the phenomenon' (Van Manen, 1990, p.92). I adopted a selective highlighting approach to thematic isolation of the transcripts. I considered the phrases or statements that seemed particularly relevant to the participants' experience of picture books and spirituality and I circled, highlighted and isolated them into groups of significant statements. The significant statements were formulated from clusters of children's dialogues, interactions and

observations in the classroom. Recurring statements were reflected upon and analysed and broad themes were considered. Reflecting and selecting themes enabled me to create individual texts of the children's experiences under thematic experience. I entered into hermeneutic reflection and analysis, creating texts as a way of entering into a dialogue with the children's experiences through description of rich textual data.

### 3.7.3 Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Gadamer (2013) argues that the researcher, armed with a pre-understanding of the social world in which the research takes place, moves along a continuum of a horizon of understanding with the research participants to create meaning and understanding. These meanings are presented through hermeneutical reflective texts detailing the essence of children's experiences. He advocates that conversation is a way to come to all human understanding and that understanding is embedded within language. He illustrates that language is the medium of the hermeneutic experience and when the researcher enters into genuine conversation with the life experiences or texts true understanding happens (Gadamer, 2013). An understanding emerges when 'the horizon projected by the texts combines with the researcher's own understanding. When we have discovered the other person's standpoint and horizon, his ideas become intelligible even though we may disagree with them' (Gadamer, 2013, p.314).

Hermeneutic phenomenology, as discussed earlier, was selected as a methodology to capture children's experiences through reflection and interpretation. Themes emerged from isolating significant statements from observations and interviews and children's experiences were interpreted and reflected upon in texts, using extracts from children's experiences under each theme. The reflection and interpretation involved entering the data through an understanding of picture books and children's spirituality and through entering into a continuum of understanding between this (horizon) and the children's experience. In this research, conversation is at the heart of the process, and I seek to adopt a genuine dialogue approach to the research questions with pupils in the study.

I entered into a horizon of understanding with the data through an interpretation of children's language reflected in the observations and interviews. Our very experiences are 'bound by language and the world is disclosed to us through language... in language the reality beyond every individual consciousness becomes visible' (Gadamer, 2013, p.466). As the beginning of the chapter describes 'the limits of language are the limits of my mind. All I know is what I have words for' (Wittgenstein, 2011, p. 246) reflects the central importance of language to this thesis. Language is used to explore the pupils' responses to the texts studied in the classroom, and insights surrounding their understanding and expressions of spirituality can be identified and claims made from the use of language. Gadamer (2013) sees genuine conversation not as something pre-planned in its discovery of meaning, but something into which we fall and from which we derive unexpected meaning.

An individual's horizon of understanding is fluid and constantly in the process of formation and this will prove important during analysis and understanding of the children's experience. Gadamer maintains that 'we must place ourselves within the historical tradition from which the text speaks in order to understand it' (2013, p.313). This is pivotal to my understanding of the children's experience during the reading process in the classroom; I seek to ensure I have a wealth of background information on the experiences of the pupils in the research and to explore the children's horizons during the discussions.

I am aware that the conversation between the researcher and the children's hermeneutic texts is therefore a fluid, dynamic jostling of horizons through which understandings emerge. A commonality or middle space between the texts and researcher is pivotal to experiencing an unfoldment and insight which leads to understanding there is no one particular method which seeks to explore the life expression of individuals. However, the researcher needs to enter into a genuine conversation, through bringing his or her self into the process.

The use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach is defended for the rich textual data it generates to understand the experience of the research participants. However, though highly appropriate for this study, I was mindful of the amount of data that would be generated. Consequently, for the second research question, just one of the three participants, Iris, was selected to reflect the analysed data. I defend the rationale for this



decision that many of the experiences and reflections presented in Iris's hermeneutical texts incorporate those of Harry and Fatima. Iris's experiences straddle material for both research questions. Her texts offer rich data which support and answer the research question and also adhere to space considerations in this thesis whilst capturing rich detailed essences of the children's experiences.

### 3.8 Summary of Chapter 3

In this chapter I outlined the methodological approach to respond to my two research questions. I discussed and defended my choice of a qualitative study and how the theoretical framing of the reader response theory, which positions the active role of the reader in learning and understanding, reflects my epistemological stance. This is compatible with placing the study within a social constructivist interpretative paradigm where knowledge is interpreted as being negotiated and constructed socially. The use of hermeneutic phenomenology to interpret my data reflects my ontological position of how 'being' is interpreted and reflected in the world. The chapter also situated how I entered the data from reading of interview and observation transcripts locating themes from significant statements. Data for each of the two research questions were presented under each theme and reflected and interpreted hermeneutically. It is to the first research question's presentation of data and discussion I now turn to in chapter 4.

*Storying is one of the most fundamental means whereby humans gain control over the world*  
Wells (1986, p.197)

#### 4.1. Introduction

In this chapter I present and discuss the findings relating to my first research question: how Year Six children (10-11 years old) express their spirituality while reading picture books in the classroom. I set out below how I entered the data from reading the transcripts from observations, group interviews and my research journal and how I present the data under each theme, reflecting and interpreting it hermeneutically.

#### 4.2 Making Sense of the Data: Significant Statements and Clustered Meanings into Themes

I have described the hermeneutic phenomenological process undertaken in detail in chapter 3 and how I approach analysis from a slightly new angle from other empirical research in the field, through using picture books. The interview and classroom observations produced rich descriptive data and led to three emerging units of meaning or themes to describe the characteristics of children's spiritual expressions with picture books. Van Manen posits that 'once transcript themes have been identified by the researcher, these themes... become objects of reflection in the hermeneutic conversation in which the researcher and (participants) collaborate' (1990, p. 99). The three emerging themes which I identified from isolating words and significant statements are: empathy, meaning making and existential musing (see Table 4A). I acknowledge the limits of my research and many more potential clusters of meaning may exist and be open to exploration, however, the strands of experiential evidence in this research study led to the formulation of these three units or themes of potential meaning to describe the children's engagement with the selected picture fiction texts.

1. **Empathy** – the children appeared to feel a sense of recognition in their connection to characters and to their plight, and related this to their own experience or lack of it. A deep concern for the human condition was regularly expressed.

**2. Meaning Making and Developing a Worldview** – the children used story as a way of thinking to both order experience and generate meaning. Existing worldviews were challenged and refined through drawing not only upon the picture books but other books and media.

**3. Existential Musing** – the children were keen to ponder on some of life’s deeper meanings and to express their views on heaven, God, the soul and why tragic events in the world take place.

Data analysis began with grouping, isolating and highlighting reoccurring sentences and words from the group interviews and classroom observation transcripts into significant statements. From the significant statements, themes began to emerge as outlined below in Table 4A. Having identified themes, I began to select extracts from the data for children under each theme. This included creating individual texts for each child where I reflected and interpreted hermeneutically on these extracts and their experience of reading picture books in the classroom and their expressions of spirituality. This included consideration of ‘what’ and ‘how’ the experience took place with verbatim examples drawn from the children’s understanding of the experience and written under the clusters of meaning illustrated above. (A full version of the table is located in Appendix 9).

| Research Question 1<br>Area of Focus   | Significant Thematic Meanings from Hermeneutic Texts                   | Evidence Examples of Significant Statements to Categorise felt senses into Themes  |
|--|--|--|
| Expressions of Children’s Spirituality | Empathy and Concern for the Human Condition – was regularly expressed. | <p>I think this is really, really wrong because nobody deserves to be treated in that way, even if they’ve done something probably really, really bad. The man in the story didn’t actually do anything wrong; he just wanted... He was hungry, like Iris said; all he wanted was some food. Putting him in a goat’s pen wasn’t the right way to treat him</p> <p><b><i>F Response to The Island – Group Interview</i></b></p> <p>If he didn’t say anything at all, it’s kind of judging a book by its cover, just because he didn’t have any clothes maybe he was different to them.... it’s like in real life it could be like if you’re black or if you’re a different race you could be treated differently.</p> |

|  |  |  |
|--|--|--|
|  |  | <p><b><i>I Response to The Island – Group Interview</i></b></p> <p>I think it's really unfair just because of how they look, because all the islanders were bigger than him as he was very skinny and a lot smaller.</p> <p><b><i>H response to The Island – Group Interview</i></b></p>   |
|  | <p><b>Meaning Making and Developing a Worldview</b> -were developed through the story.</p>         | <p>Well, I thought they had a very close friendship bond. Then, when it died, it will probably be like a person dying, because in the book it said that he loved the dog, probably, more than a brother. So, if my brother died, I'd be very upset. So, if I loved someone more than my brother, then he'd very, very, very upset.</p> <p><b><i>F response to the picture book BLBHS Group Interview</i></b></p> <p>He's feeling loneliness as he doesn't have any parents who actually love him properly</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>Even though the people up in our classroom didn't do the interview, they took something away from this, because there's quite a lot of, like- Not pressure but, these days, because it's all about, like, the fashion and if you don't have, like, the best phone, stuff like that, I hope they took stuff away from that and just realise that you don't have to be perfect.</p> <p><b><i>I response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> |
|  | <p><b>Existential Musing</b> - children were keen to ponder some of life's essential meanings.</p> | <p>It's, kind of, like who the person is. The soul is everything that you don't see in a person, from the outside</p> <p><b><i>H Response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>But the soul is basically how you feel, it makes you- You know, people say you have, like a sad soul, that's not a good thing, like, you always want a happy soul.</p> <p><b><i>F response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>As Fatima was saying, the souls rise up, it's because, like, your body is left here but your soul, your person, goes up.</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>Like Harry said, with the skull, and also on the other page it's, kind of, like all the darkness is, like, draining out onto, like, the light</p> <p><b><i>I response to The Harmonica</i></b></p>  |

Table 4A: Examples of Significant Statements of Children's Expressions of Spirituality

The data are reflected through children's hermeneutic texts. The texts are a hermeneutic reflection and interpretation on each of the three themes of children's spiritual expression which unfolded from the group interview and classroom transcripts. These were:

spirituality as concern for the human condition through empathy; spirituality as meaning making and developing a worldview; and spirituality as existential musing.

#### 4.3 Spirituality as Empathy and Concern for the Human Condition

The children responded to the picture book themes and characters with sensitivity and concern which can be deemed empathetic. Such a feeling of empathy and concern sits within the working definition of spirituality discussed in chapter 1. As previously described, I reflect and interpret upon children's extracts from the data under each theme. The written reflection and interpretation on the themes are described as children's texts. I now turn to discuss Harry's text relating to expressions of spirituality as empathy and concern for the human condition.

##### 4.3.1 Hermeneutic Text: Harry

Harry is a ten-year-old pupil, is viewed by his class teacher as confident and articulate, and does not subscribe to any particular religious belief. He was keen to be involved in the research and is considered by his teacher as an able pupil who enjoys reading and writing stories. He is half Australian, has a younger sibling and has attended the school since nursery.

Researcher: Can you tell me Harry how you felt about this picture (Image 4A) when the teacher was reading it?

Harry: Light and dark almost represent happiness and sadness. When you are sad, you're almost like dull and not bright and joyful as you are when someone is bright, they would be happy. This is how George must have felt in the picture.

Because the pictures have so much detail you can, like, even if the words weren't there, you can, like, tell that George was, like, not looked after because the way, like that he's all scruffy and a bit dirty and the same as the dog. The words describe themselves as all mouldy, and they are in the picture, even more so than the words say. It makes you think about other people and how they are feeling not just about yourself.

Extract 4A Group Interview – Harry- '*Big, Little Book of Happy Sadness*' (BLBHS)

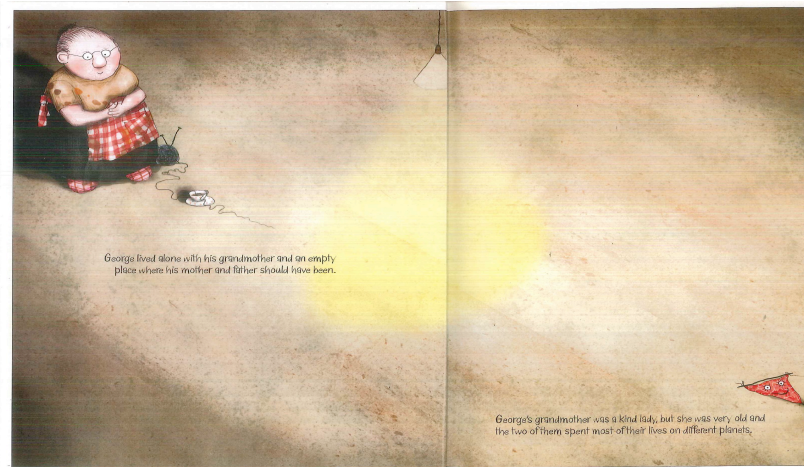


Image 4A, *BLBHS*

### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Connecting both pictures and words in the story has supported Harry in making a connection with the story's protagonist George. Harry's expressions and explanations during the classroom observation suggest that he has lost himself in the story, forgetting himself and making the character come to life. He can interpret the picture and make a connection between light and darkness and he links colour to the emotion the character is feeling. The text does not mention that George is unloved or that he is not looked after, indeed his grandmother appears on the first page, yet Harry infers this from the illustrations of George. He can discern that there is a connection between the two characters and despite the lack of text he draws upon the images to suggest that the characters are not looked after. Harry demonstrates that he can vicariously understand the human and emotive issues in the story and relate it to his own personal narrative to express both to the class and individually in partner work. He has a 'receptivity' to the character that is an aspect of empathy, being open to someone's feeling and to feel with them (Cooper, 2013, p.22).

I was just thinking, like, the book made it quite sad and I was thinking that, instead of putting the dog at the back, tucked away, if that- And its last few days, then should put it at the front for people to see. Luckily, in the story, George was, like, even though he had his own troubles, he was, like, looking out for other beings [0:14:39].

Extract 4B Group Interview – Harry- *BLBHS*

Harry is navigating the complex interplay between his own life and experiences and those of the characters. In Extract 4B Harry is able to talk about the character George and make a judgement about his personality, that despite how lonely he is, he thinks about others. Harry is showing an understanding of how another human thinks: ostensibly, the character could have been immersed in his own loneliness yet he put the dog's interest first. Here Harry is expressing and developing his worldview or understanding of the world through contemplating the character's behaviour and assessing his qualities. His perceptive insights into understanding human actions continue in his responses to the picture book *The Island*.

It kind of shows migration and being different. Even though it's in a much more exaggerated form, it's like you can actually see what's actually happening around the world, because then, when you think about it, that is happening. You also get to see that at the beginning of the book everyone has forks and stuff and they're pushing around the person, and here one little boy is slightly different to the other younger kids and they're poking him with sticks. So, they're following what the upper generation are doing and just continuing, like almost bullying people because of how they look.

Extract 4C Group Interview – Harry – *The Island*

Extract 4C shows Harry discussing the cultural hostility faced by a stranger who was washed up on an island. He is reflecting on how the book is a lens to the wider world and illustrates the treatment such people all over the world face. He is articulating his thinking aloud, relating the fictional events to his own life framework of understanding. He notices that the reaction is a form of bullying as a result of the character's appearance. Although Harry doesn't acknowledge whether he himself has experienced bullying, his comments reflect a strong empathetic resonance with the character and the unfairness of the situation. The text remains neutral regarding the behaviour of the islanders and the stranger, yet Harry appears to be using the picture books to negotiate his meaning and understanding of the human behaviours.

Well, I think no matter how much you're beaten, there's always some bits of personality within you, and his personality was bright and happy and full of music. At the back of the book it gives background, and it said that for the rest of his life, he played music, once he got out of the camp. Which shows that it was within him the whole time

Extract 4D Group Interview Harry *The Harmonica*

The enduring nature of the human spirit and the resilience of the human character is considered by Harry in Extract 4D. The group are discussing the picture book *The*

*Harmonica*, which follows the story of a young Polish Jewish boy torn from his family and his hardships in a concentration camp. The boy survives by playing Schubert on his harmonica to the Nazi guard (see Image 4B). Harry sensitively considers the brutality felt by the Jewish boy and considers that his personality, his true self, remained unaffected by this treatment at the hands of another. Harry is able to identify how the boy was able to continue with his life after enduring such horrors and that music supported him in this. Harry had read the book jacket himself to explore further that the picture book was based on a true story, and he was interested in another man's fight for freedom. Here Harry is confronting how human behaviour can plunge such depths and the redemptive power music holds as a way of escaping horrors. He views music as a way of stimulating the human personality connected to beauty and happiness.



Image 4B *The Harmonica*

Because he was playing to himself, not when he was playing to the old man, but he was playing from his heart, and then another boy said, like, "Bless you." Because he was, like, saying that because he was doing it for everyone else in the room, for hope, so he was saying that you're almost like a saint, that you're like, giving us all something to look forward to.

I think he's very selfish because, like, he's kind of using him, almost like a puppet, because he makes him and go as he please, and if he doesn't do it properly, he'll just dispose of him. Yes, he just controls everybody and everything, just because he has power

Extract 4E Group Interview Harry *The Harmonica*



Harry sympathetically appears to get under the skin of the character in *The Harmonica* when he grapples with issues of the heart in Extract 4E. Through introspection, Harry has concluded, despite the Nazi guard compelling the Jewish boy to play in order to survive, that the boy overcame this situation through connecting with his inner-self and effectively playing to help himself survive. The altruistic and survival nature of the human spirit is acknowledged by Harry at its most authentic when he discusses how the boy's playing gave the other prisoners' hope and the appreciation of beauty in the bleakest of times (see Image 4C). Harry hints at the spiritual nature of music and how the Jewish child was almost a saint, intimating that he helped others with his music.

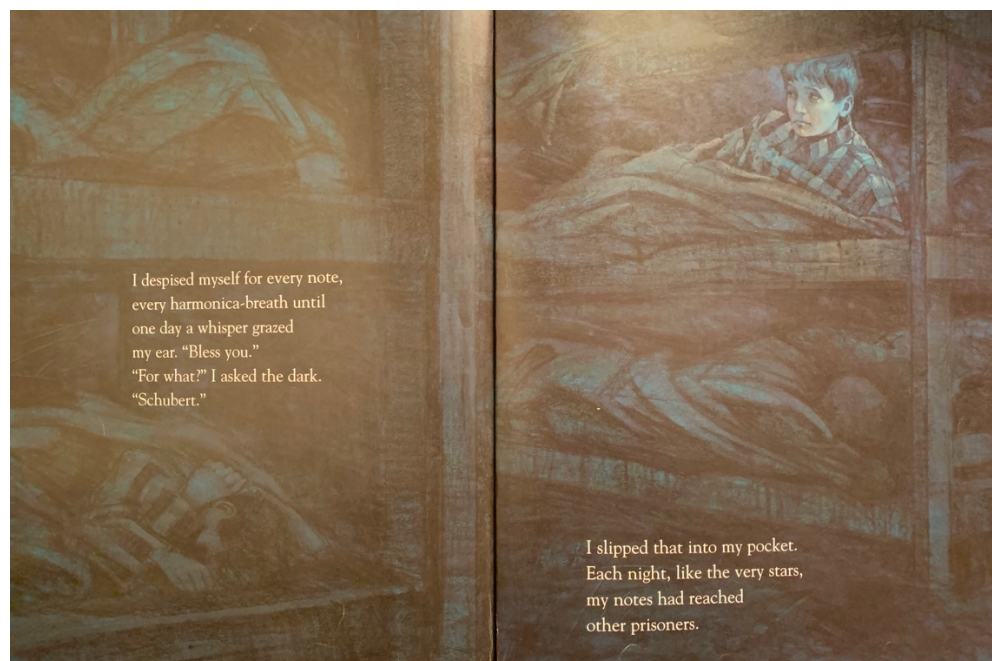


Image 4C *The Harmonica*

Harry continues to reflect upon the asymmetrical power imbalance between the Nazi guard and Jewish child. He makes an analogy between the lack of power the Jewish child has with being the guard's puppet, that he controls whether he lives or dies. Such an intensity of human power over another is considerable and Harry reflects on this by pondering on the fragility of life as the guard can dispose of him at will. Power and its corruptive nature, and the control of humans by each other, may be stimulating Harry's thinking as he becomes aware that the Nazi guard controls the lives of millions of people.

Harry engaged with the picture books at a deep level and openly discussed his emotions and feelings on a wide range of issues affecting the human condition. Such relational empathic sensitivity for others (Hay and Nye, 2008) is reflective of a spiritual sensitivity discussed in my working definition of spirituality in chapter 1. I now turn to interpret such sensitivity through hermeneutic reflection on Fatima's experience of picture books.

#### 4.3.2 Hermeneutic Text: Fatima

Fatima is a ten-year-old girl who describes herself as a Muslim and wears a hijab. She is religious and proud of her faith and background and was celebrating Eid at the time of the research. She presents as happy and outgoing and spoke of a sense of duty to her family and school mates. She has been at the school since nursery and has an older and a younger brother. I begin to present hermeneutic reflection and interpretation on Fatima's engagement to the picture book *The Island*.

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Fatima displayed a level of reflexivity in her empathy towards the characters in the picture book *The Island* on several occasions. In this striking personal and sensitive example, she re-assesses her own framework of understanding and belonging to a country and speaks about her personal family background in Extract 4F.

I sometimes wonder how I ever actually got to be born here, because it's actually cool [0:11:19]; it's actually really, really... We're all really, really lucky because there are people around the world who live in poor countries and they have to work. Maybe sometimes they can only have one meal for the whole day. Sometimes they might not even get any food for the day, maybe not even for a week. They're starving and hungry, and all they want is some food to eat.

Extract 4F Group Interview – Fatima – *The Island*

Fatima is here perhaps beginning to experience the relational connection between herself and the fictional character in the picture book as she feels her way into the character's situation. She recalls how fortunate she is not to be an immigrant on the island and that she is lucky to have been born in the UK, and talks about how her own family, originally from Kenya, had once been immigrants to the UK. Fatima's response shows a sense of

compassion for the injustice and inequality across the world; she is identifying with this through the themes presented to her in the picture book and begins to relate this to her own story and narrative. She ponders why she is so fortunate to live safely in the UK while others such as the stranger on the island are not. Prompted by the story, she is contemplating the inequality and unfairness present in society. Emotionally, she states that all some people want is food, appearing to suggest a level of incredulity that such a basic commodity is out of the reach of many. Fatima's interaction with the picture books supported a reflection of empathy filled with substance and complexity; through such an intersection, Hart (2003) spiritual connection may occur. Not only does Fatima identify with the characters but she relates the themes in the story to current events taking place in society.

Yes, in the book the islanders don't want the stranger to come and enter the island, because they say it's their property. That kind of relates in real life. It's kind of like immigration because many people want to come inside the UK, but we don't have enough space and most people don't want them to, because they think it will be different with them here.

Extract 4G Group Interview – Fatima – *The Island*

Here, Fatima draws a parallel between the violent xenophobic behaviour of the islanders to ownership of a country and people. She sensitively talks about the fear some people harbour towards strangers and how they feel that if they are born in a country, they appear to own it. She can discern how art is imitating life as she relates the picture book events to society at large. Contextualising her understanding, she begins to identify a rationale for human behaviour and to understand that people in society might possibly behave in the same way as they do in the picture book. Fatima has captured ideas in the picture book regarding the islanders' fears of a stranger threatening to change their way of life. The book depicts the views of all society from school teachers to priests and she is perhaps picking up on the fear that resonated with many of the islanders.

I think it just made me understand how lucky we really are, because there are some people in the world who actually judge people by their appearance and actually treat people even probably worse than how the islanders treated the stranger. Because, even though they didn't give him a name, or gave him clothes, or gave him even food or [a proper home 0:17:11], proper place to sleep, there are people who actually do more, like abusing, neglecting, do much worse than what the islanders did to the stranger. That

just shows how lucky we are to not be like one of those people and how we can come to school without any fuss.

Extract 4H Group interview – Fatima – *The Island*

Engagement with the picture book *The Island* supported Fatima in gaining a deeper layer of understanding with the character; in Extract 4H she is articulating her idea of how people may judge a person based on their appearance and how others treat one and other. Fatima's sensitivity to the treatment of humans is expressed as she feels fortunate not to have experienced some of the distasteful and unpleasant behaviour the islanders inflicted on the stranger. She recognises prejudice and judgements purely on appearance and how damaging this can be for a person. Layers of concern are echoed by Fatima that people are treated without basic dignity and how important it is for humans to have an identity, a name, a story. Denying humans basic rights such as clothes, food and a place to live concerns Fatima and she introduces the word luck into the conversation. She is fortunate not to be in that situation yet cautious that it doesn't happen to her. For Fatima attending school without having to encounter such difficulty is a very real issue despite the conversation being premised on a fictional character and events.

Fatima engaged with the picture books at a deep and sensitive level and freely discussed her emotions and feelings on a wide range of issues affecting the human condition. Such relational empathic sensitivity for others is reflective of a spiritual sensitivity. I now turn to interpret such sensitivity through hermeneutic reflection on Iris's experiences of the picture books.

#### 4.3.3 Hermeneutic Text: Iris

Iris is an eleven-year-old, who describes herself as sporty and popular with many friends. She is English and lived abroad for the first part of her education but has been at the school for three years. She does not identify with a specific religious background. I begin to present hermeneutic reflection on Iris' engagement to the picture book *The Harmonica*.

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

In Extract 4I, Iris talks about how the pictures in the picture books have affected her and attempts to rationalise to herself how a Nazi guard with a penchant for and appreciation of classical music, can be responsible for abject and senseless cruelty inflicted on people like the Jewish child.

Let's see. I don't, like, this was probably the most effective, for me, because it's like, it looks like he cares so much but then if you, like, dig deeper, all his hands are with blood, and he's just a cruel evil person. Even though he finds music so beautiful. So that also shows that, like, and he plays, and he's really giving it his all. Not because, when he gets into it, it's not so he won't die, it's more to play for happiness, because this is the only time he can play, but when he plays for happiness it's to the other people. For this it's not happy, it's just as, like, an order. So, this page (Points to the picture - see Image 4D) below).

Extract 4I Group Interview – Iris – *The Harmonica*

She has interpreted the pictures and texts to arrive at a conclusion that the Nazi guard is a tyrant possessing evil and cruel characteristics. This leads to a reflection on the mental processes of the boy when he plays the harmonica; she appears to be grappling with whether he's playing to survive or for the love of playing beautiful music. Contemplating such intense aspects of the human condition is moving and powerful.

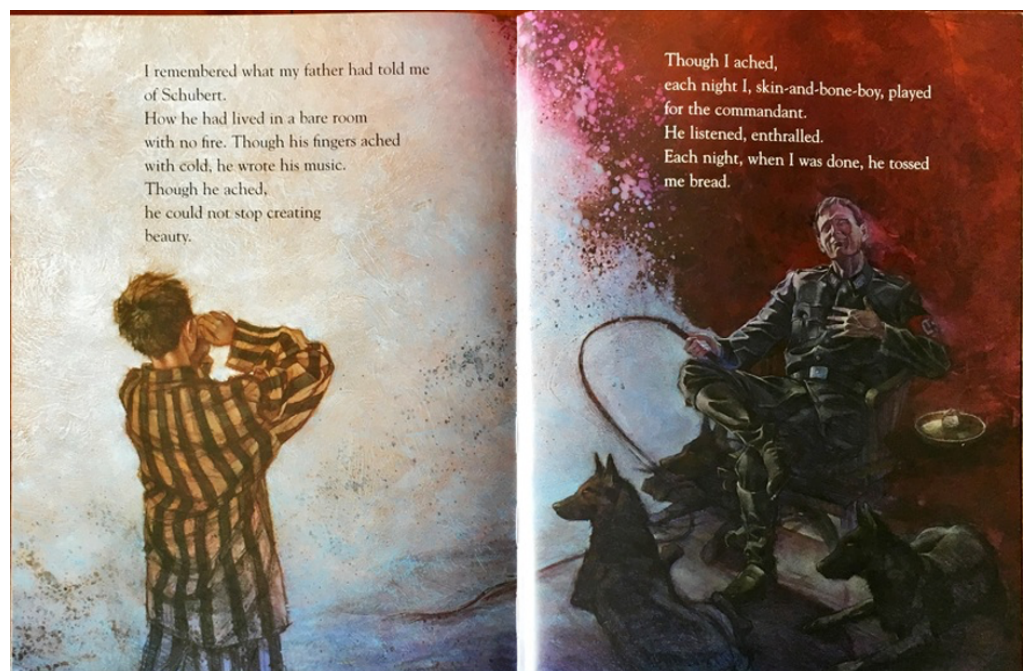


Image 4D– *The Harmonica*

Reflection on her engagement with *The BLBHS* in extract 4J reveals further layers of vicarious compassion and a humanistic concern for humans and animals.

Mainly, when George is at the shelter, I think that, like, your time will come, like, for the whole story and for most of George's life, he's been upset but then, now, like, his time's come because he found the dog and the dog's time's come because even if it's just at the very end, if it was, like, at the end for the dog but then George saved him. So, no matter how much waiting you have to do there will be, like, a light at the end of the tunnel, basically.

Extract 4J Group Interview – Iris –*BLBHS*

Iris demonstrates her capacity to navigate the subjective experience of George, a lonely boy, and his happiness in finding a three-legged dog, saved from death, at the dog's home. She also enters into the subjective world of the text as she navigates the complex relationship between the boy and his grandmother, stating that he must have been unhappy for most of his life. Neither the text nor the pictures reflect this, yet Iris has interpreted the level of sadness George exhibits as acute and over a long period of time. She rather euphorically reflects George's time has arrived in the sense that he will finally have somebody to love, hinting at her understanding of all humans' need to love and be loved (see Image 4E). She identifies George as a hero, since he rescues the dog from being put down as he only has three legs and nobody wants him. Is it George who rescues the dog or the other way around? Iris appears to suggest that all humans need a happy ending to their individual stories and is hopeful that this is the case, as she says that after all the waiting there is light at the end of the tunnel. Iris's faith in humanity is certain here: if you wait and hope long enough, good things follow. Through her engagement with picture books Iris displays the emotional capacity to consider complex emotional themes. Such heightened emotional capacity can lead to the development of empathy and there is a tendency to catch the emotions of others in literature (Cooper, 2013).





Image 4E *The BLBHS*

It's, kind of, like, the kite on the other side. It's, kind of, like the parents could be bringing them together, because they're in the middle and the grandma's all the way on the far corner where it's a little bit more dark and the... It's, kind of, like the boy but it's the kite- If the parents were there then maybe it would bring them all a bit closer together.

Extract 4K Group Interview – Iris – *BLBHS*

In this extract, Iris appears to catch George's emotion precisely where she grapples with the issue of the light in the story, 'a space where his parents should have been' (see Image 4A at the beginning of this chapter). She captures the emotions of his loneliness and processes these to create an understanding which fits her view of the world. She attempts to reconcile the gulf in George's life through visualising the image of the kite in the picture as a sign which suggests loneliness. George would like to be playing with the kite, potentially with his parents yet George is absent from the image. She can feel into the picture and realise what it might be like for George not to have parents who love him. She continues to show concern for Jeremy the dog as well as George.

When it went to the dog's point of view it's quite nice, because they all think that dogs don't really have feelings and they just show it by whimpering or barking, but when it said, "I haven't even made my last dream," it, like, shows that dogs have dreams too and they dream of doing stuff and they're, kind of, like humans, just in a different form. Just because, like, he hadn't had a last dream he thought that he was going to be put down.

Extract 4L Group Interview – Iris – *BLBHS*

Here, Iris explores the nature of the dog's feelings and considers the possibility that dogs dream of their futures and happenings in life. She notes that the picture book suggests that he feels that he has gone to heaven as his new home is blissful and filled with love. She shows a sensitive awareness to the feelings of animals and draws interesting parallels to

their ability to dream and feel like humans. Iris sees the dog in the same light as George, that they both are dreaming of a different life; she doesn't distinguish between the level of emotion she shows for humans or animals.

If he didn't even say anything at all, it's kind of like judging a book by its cover, just because he didn't have clothes or maybe he was a bit different to them. By him being different, they [used this book, but they use him as, like, naked and short [0:07:31], and shorter or taller, but in real life it could be like if you're black or if you're a different race, then you could be treated different.

Extract 4M Group Interview – Iris – *The Island*

Responding to *The Island*, Iris reacts indignantly as she reacts emotionally to how the islander is treated and displays a connection both with the stranger and how the islanders are treating him. She suggests that the stranger being different from the islanders is problematic and rejects the uniformity the islanders seek. She ignites a spark of disdain that they are not even giving the stranger a chance; she has used her experience from the picture books to ascertain that the book presents the stranger as smaller, thinner and weaker than the islanders. Such a contrast is interesting as she rejects this perception and comments they are "judging a book by its cover". In the picture book all the characters are white and race isn't mentioned; the difference in the book is appearance. Yet Iris links the experience of strangers in the book to race and talks about being black. Her own worldview might perceive unfair treatment as associated with differences in race, so this indicates how she has peeled back the layers of interpretation and meaning in the picture book. The text and the conversation offered her a space to reflect passionately her views which are arguably empathic reflections of her concern for others.

#### 4.3.4 Summary

In this section I have presented the hermeneutic texts of Harry, Fatima and Iris, reflecting their engagement with the three picture books. I entered into a hermeneutic conversation through interpreting the data extracts and fusing a horizon of understanding with my own. From this, meaning unfolded, and interpretation and reflection are presented in the texts through the detailed descriptions of the three pupils' experience. Such reflection upon the texts, suggests children's deep concern for the human condition, showing empathy for



fictional characters and events. This reflection of empathy and concern, I argue, are characteristics of expressions of spirituality.

#### 4.4 Spirituality as Meaning Making and Developing a Worldview

The second significant theme emerging from the data was how children expressed spirituality as a form of meaning making and developing a worldview, supporting them to make sense of events or actions. As Wells (1986) argues at the beginning of this chapter, storying can support children to gain an understanding of the world. I now present my hermeneutic reflection and interpretation through the children's texts beginning with Harry's experiences of meaning making and developing a worldview.

##### 4.4.1 Hermeneutic Text: Harry

A central argument in this thesis is that stories have power to support meaning making through which children can negotiate and enhance their understanding of the world. Bruner argues that 'humans make meaning and think in terms of a 'storied' text which intentionally catch the human condition and the vividness of human experience fully' (1986, p.14). It is to this area of spirituality I now turn to illustrate how Harry demonstrated a capacity for meaning making.

**Interviewer:** So, do you think he needed to feel guilty? The boy, just for getting bread because he was good at something?

**Harry:** Well, I think he probably would have felt guilty, because from my perspective he didn't want to go play for the man, because he was doing all these things to people. So I think he did feel very guilty. Yes, and then he feels guilty because he's playing something that he loves so much, and that someone's almost like paying them, but he doesn't want to do it for him. He wants to do it out of his heart.

Extract 4N Group Interview- Harry- *The Harmonica*

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Harry is grappling here with a difficult moral question over the boy's action in the concentration camp. On the one hand if he plays the beautiful music he gets to survive and if not, he may die. Whether the boy should feel guilty arouses strong emotions in Harry; he

demonstrates a strong personal narrative in regard to the morality of the character stating that the boy had little choice in the matter: if he didn't play, he would be killed. The story in the picture book seems to support Harry to think and understand the dilemma the boy was placed in and to consider the frustration of using something so beautiful to gain scraps of bread (see Image 4F). The horror of the situation is brought into Harry's conscious mind and he pieces together his understanding of the situation and develops a strong rationale and worldview. Using the picture book as a conduit for meaning making allows Harry and his peers to develop a community of enquiry, through which they can vicariously examine character's actions and decisions from a safe distance. Harry continues to create meaning and understanding from the picture book *The Island* to understand the treatment of the stranger.

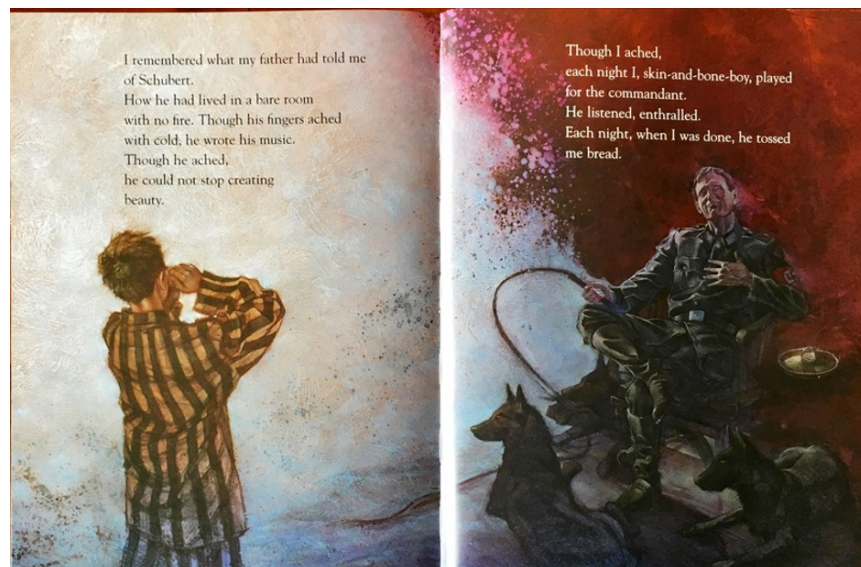


Image 4F *The Harmonica*

**Harry:** I found it quite a sad story because the stranger did nothing wrong, yet they all treated him badly. At one point of the story, they were saying that they were giving him a job so he could get food, but then no-one would let him try anything. They just thought that he couldn't do this or he couldn't do this, when they never actually gave him a try, they just said, "He wouldn't be good enough, he wouldn't be good enough," but they never gave him a try. They just shut him out and sent him to sea (see Image 4H).

**Interviewer:** I wonder what you thought about how the islanders treated the stranger. Harry, do you want to talk a little bit about that?

**Harry:** I think they kind of neglected him, because they just sent him away to unpopulated place of the island where there used to be a goat pen. They just sent him there and he wasn't allowed out. No-one gave him food or no-one gave him comfort and came over.

**Interviewer:** What do you think about another human being treating another human being like that?

**Harry:** I think it's unfair just because of how they look, because all the islanders were bigger than him and he was very skinny and a lot smaller. It kind of shows migration and being different. Even though it's in a much more exaggerated form, it's like you can actually see what's actually happening around the world, because then, when you think about it, that is happening.

Extract 4O Group Interview-Harry- *The Island*

Here, Harry is contemplating the events when the islanders appear to be paying lip service to giving a chance to the stranger. He understands the subtle nuances in the story that they do not really welcome the stranger, but feel it is their duty to look after him. The book begins with a discussion of the islanders stating 'What should they do? and 'surely, he wouldn't like it here'. This along with Image 4G necessitates Harry to use his imagination to both understand and re-orientate his own worldview. Harry is being stimulated by both the text and the images leaving what Iser (1980) deems as blanks and gaps in the story. The reader is not told at any time that the islander's behaviour is wrong. Through his imagination 'he is drawn into the events and made to supply what is meant from what is not said' (Iser, 1980, p. 168).

Harry is weaving together this understanding and assessing it against his inner narrative. The world of fiction and his own understanding are oscillating; he begins to discover that, despite superficial efforts on the part of the islanders, they actually might not be that keen to help. He states "they never actually gave him a try" and recognises that to him this is sad and unfair. Harry is making sense of the behaviour of the islanders which seems to be at odds with his thinking. He talks about how they locked the stranger in a goat pen and he was not looked after well.

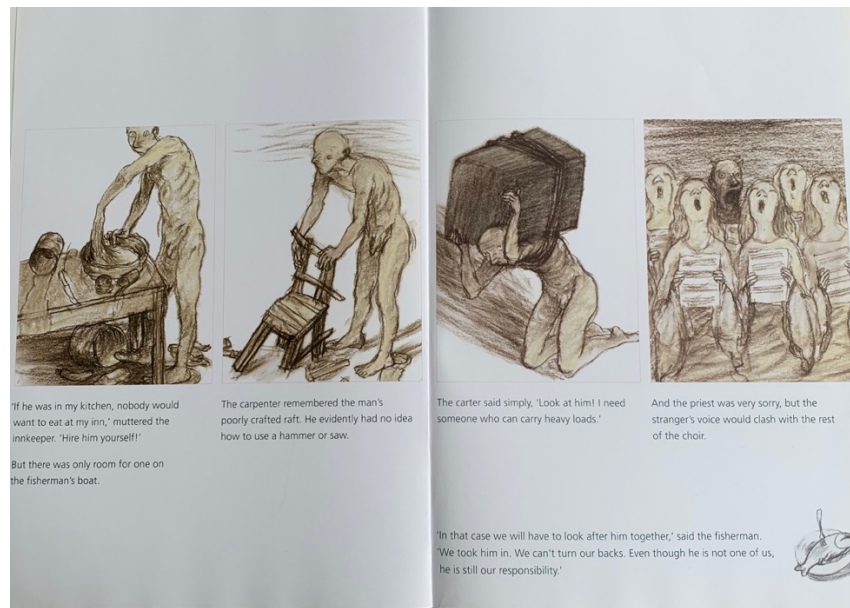


Image 4G *The Island*

Harry's sense of justice is evident when he discusses that the actions of the islanders were unjust, that they over-powered the stranger who didn't have an opportunity to defend himself. Harry relates the fictional events in the picture book to world events relating to the struggles migrants face and considers how this discussion has made him think about the world around him. Harry has begun to negotiate his own meaning from the stimulus offered by the picture book. The treatment of the stranger at the hands of the islanders has resonated with his existing understanding, but from this he is making connections to the world beyond and expanding his horizon of understanding.

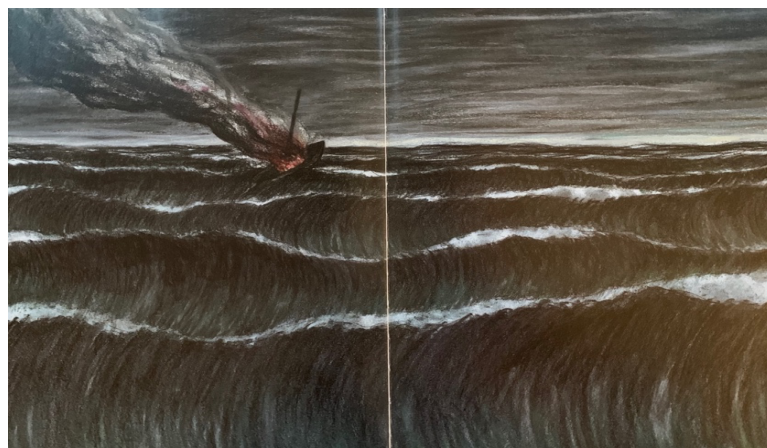


Image 4H *The Island*

Harry has engaged with the picture books at a deep and sensitive level and has expressed how he has negotiated meaning and his understanding of themes from them. I turn to discuss how Fatima has explored her own meanings.

#### 4.4.2 Hermeneutic Text: Fatima

I present a hermeneutic reflection and interpretation on Fatima's experience in using picture books to support expressions of spirituality through meaning making and developing a worldview.

Also 'The Other Side of the Truth', because Sade and Femi, who are the two main characters, they come from Nigeria and they came to England, and they kept on being questioned by officers and no-one else was, just because of their appearance

In some countries, not just in Europe or Africa or anywhere, like in different places in the world where people are being actually treated like this and not right

Like places like mainly in Africa, maybe, like there are some countries that actually... Like there's Turkey, who wants to come inside the EU, but actually most countries are actually fighting for them not to come in, just because of how they are.

Extract 4P Group Interview-Fatima- *The Island*

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Here Fatima makes strong and sometimes impassioned accounts about how she understands the picture book *The Island*. The story does not mention the setting, the class teacher explains it is an Australian picture book, yet Fatima draws upon her own knowledge of literature and what she has read in the news to further her meaning of the text. She notices strong parallels between the themes in the picture book and the class novel they are reading and actively discusses the main characters in the novel, Sade and Femi, who are refugees, fleeing from a dictatorship in Nigeria. The novel by Beverley Naidoo, has clearly made an impact on her as she compares and contrasts their treatment at the hands of government officials entering the UK with the treatment of the stranger by the islanders as a result of his appearance. She is drawing from multiple sources of information which the picture book events are triggering, adding to her worldview. Her strong opinion that these are not merely fictitious events in a picture book but representative of a real-life

problem in Europe and Africa appears to resonate deeply with her. The events in the picture book act as a stimulus to deepen her understanding and add to her meaning about how immigrants and refugees are treated. Fatima has moved the conversation far from the stranger in the picture book; the stranger has become for her a person in Africa, or maybe Turkey, where people are actively fighting against allowing them to join the European Union, similar to the stranger not being able to join the islanders.

Two important points are evident here. First, through the opportunity to engage with a multi-layered picture book Fatima has had the space to reflect and think deeply about her meaning and understanding of the character and themes, and she has not only used the picture book story but other literature and possibly news stories she has heard and internalised as her own. The characters and events in the story now become her own as she tells her own personal story and re-writes her own virtual text alongside that of the picture book (Iser, 1980). Secondly, Fatima's existing understanding and worldview of the issues in *The Island* are enhanced by the experience and echo the concept that a worldview or opinion cannot be placed or demanded on children but that they have to negotiate and interpret their own (Erricker et al., 1997). Fatima continues to express and negotiate her meaning regarding prejudice, friendship, loneliness and parents in the group discussion of *The BLBHS* in Extract 4Q.

Knowing that this actually happens in real life, like, if people look at a dog, or any animal, and say they don't want them because of their appearance, it shows how much people judge other people or animals by their appearance, and I don't think that's fair. I think you should judge them on their personality. If they're nice then, yes, you can adopt them, if you fall in love with them then, yes, you can adopt them. But if you don't really feel anything for the animal and you don't feel that's the right one then that's when you can probably say, "No, I don't want that one."

It's basically looking in a reflection because the dog is being isolated and alone and not looked after and, kind of, neglected as well. And so is George, he's not being looked after properly because he has his grandma and, you know, it's harder for her to look after than with regular parents because she's old and she's frail and she needs looking after as well as George does.

So, it, kind of, makes them, when they look at each other's eyes they realise that they're basically seeing a reflection of themselves meaning that, basically, they're looking into themselves.

Extract 4Q: Group Interview-Fatima- *BLBHS*

Here, Fatima continues to articulate opinions on how people are wrong to judge others by their appearance. The picture book hints at George, a lonely boy, being scruffy and the dog



shelter owner tries to convince him to take one of the other dogs who have four - and not three - legs. However, Fatima has created her own interpretation and meaning from the story and talks about how animals and humans should be treated well. She has worked out her own internal framework of meaning and rationale from the story and states that you should adopt an animal if you love them for their personality not how they look. Again, this is quite a departure from anything mentioned in the book and also says that if that love is not felt, it is fine not to adopt the dog. Layers of meaning and understanding seem to be interacting here, with Fatima, drawing upon her own understanding and reading of the book.

The absence of George's parents in the story also caught Fatima's attention and she seeks to imagine what life must be like for him living with his grandmother. The story hints at the fact that his parents have died and his grandmother is forced to care for him but they are from different worlds. Fatima strongly affirms that this must be difficult for his grandmother, being frail. The pictures in the book suggest that she is quite active, yet Fatima has identified her as being a stereotypical grandmother figure, as old and frail; perhaps Fatima is drawing on her own experience here (see Image 4I). This highlights to me that she is adding layers of meaning to her worldview and negotiating the information she is gaining from the book. A complex synergy between the story, text, pictures and her own held worldview are at play. She is able to sense the loneliness that the dog and George feel, while seeing a reflection of each other in themselves. She picks up this theme further in the following extract.



Image 4I *The BLBHS*

Yes, because most people think that, to be popular, or to have the most friends, you've got to look the part. You can look the part but it's mainly about being yourself and not worrying what others think of you. If others don't like you for who you are then don't be friends with them. I know somebody who's, kind of, like that, who doesn't have any friends but they haven't lost their parents so they just feel, like, sad and alone. I try my best to actually help them and make them feel better. I feel sorry for them. They haven't lost their parents, they're still very happy, but the fact that they just don't have any friends, and they seem, kind of, lonely, and nobody really goes near them.

Extract 4R Group Interview-Fatima- *BLBHS*

Here Fatima moves the discussion to express how she feels about George feeling alienated and marginalised from the world with nobody to talk to (Extract 4R). She is responding to a group discussion regarding why George would pick Jeremy, the dog who had only three legs, and the dismissive attitude of the dog shelter lady. At points in her explanation it appears that Fatima is telling her own story: she has woven the meaning from the picture book and is tentatively exploring her revised worldview and understanding as she shares how people judge others on their appearance and how her friends and potentially herself experience the pressure to conform in order to be liked. There is a sadness in her tale about having to look the part to feel you belong and she relates her understanding to a personal example of someone she knows without friends. She still connects this to the story that has prompted the discussion, and adds that her friends' parents have not died as George's may have. It is moving to hear her describe how lonely her friend is, that nobody goes near them and that she tries her best to offer support. The tale of George from the picture book has resonated here, prompting inner searching and piecing together strands of meaning which are then translated into a personal story that Fatima tells to the group. This echoes the understanding that 'narrative is a primary act of mind' and is indeed, as Fatima highlights, 'transferred to art from life' (Hardy, 1988, p. 12).

I now reflect and interpret upon Iris' experiences of meaning making and developing a worldview whilst engaged with the picture books.

#### 4.4.3 Hermeneutic Text: Iris

Iris discusses her understanding of loneliness from the picture book *BLBHS* which leads to her reflecting upon the peer pressure of modern society in Extract 4S.



Well, let's say, if you feel lonely and you have no friends but you still have your parents. It's, kind of, the same as the boy here. But he's feeling loneliness in a different way. He's feeling loneliness as he doesn't have any parents who actually love him properly. He doesn't have the same loving, tender, parents that he wants. If you are, like, feeling sad, it's, kind of, the same loneliness, because you're feeling really lonely in your heart as well.

If people put you under pressure then, obviously, you're going to act to it. But if you have, like, enough friends and you're just, like, "No, it's fine, you don't have to do that," then, if you \_\_\_\_ [0:35:25] whatever you want you won't feel as, like, under pressure.

Even though the people up in our classroom didn't do this interview, they took something away from this, because there's quite a lot of, like- Not pressure but, these days, because it's all about, like, the fashion and if you don't have, like, the best phone, stuff like that, I hope they took stuff away from that and just realise that you don't have to be perfect.

Extract 4S Group Interview- Iris- *BLBHS*

### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Here Iris attempts to disentangle types of loneliness and categorises them into loneliness suffered from the result of not having parents and caused by a lack of friends. The narrative in the book has prompted her to order her understanding of the concept of loneliness and she is attempting this through her categorisation of the term and bringing in the heart to help her make sense of it. Sadness and loneliness are synonymous to her; the feeling of loneliness is sensed and felt through the heart. The story states that there is a place where George's parents should have been, yet Iris uses the indeterminacy in the text to construct her own story (Iser, 1980), stating that he wanted tender parents to love him properly.

The conversation then took a personal turn about how people might feel lonely if they don't fit in with a group of friends. Iris relates her understanding to herself and others to express her ideas. The example in Extract 4S reads as if Iris is in the process of constructing and ironing out her understanding as she speaks about peer pressure to conform, stating that if you have a group of friends it is acceptable to be yourself and not yield to pressure to look or behave in a certain way. George's loneliness in the picture book has offered a platform from which Iris can contemplate and consider what this means to her. She contextualises George's experience of loneliness to her own personal framework of understanding and her own life experiences concerned with materialism. She hints at the pressure she and her generation feel regarding a pervasive materialism linked to friendship and fitting in. She states that fashion and having the 'right' type of phone are ways to prevent loneliness and to attract friends and that she hopes the class (not present in this

group interview) can heed this message. Her poignant concern for her generation is clear; that you don't have to be perfect and this indicates that this process of meaning making allows for sparks of spirituality to emerge.

Iris continues to explore her ideas and understanding of a range of themes and emotions stimulated in her reading and interaction when she offers her views on *The Island* in Extract 4T below.

Yes, I think it could be a bit like how some countries aren't letting immigrants in. It's kind of like building the wall, but obviously we don't actually build a wall.

It's just like a massive wall going up, so we're not part of anything; we're kind of just all like the islanders. We're just all like one; we don't have anyone to turn to for any other countries. They use an island, but it kind of could be the same thing of, like, they're all like walls almost.

I don't think that's right, because I think if they need food and stuff from us, I think we should let them in and they should get it.

It helped understand that, like, to kind of be thankful, because some people aren't born perfect or by looks or anything, but nowadays, if [once 0:16:12] someone who maybe was in a wheelchair or some sort of disability came to our school, we wouldn't do that [to him]. That kind of makes me proud almost, but to think that some people think of other people with disabilities at a lower level than them, that's just really rude. When the fisherman stands up for him, it realises that he has common sense and he's realising what's right and wrong.

Extract 4T Group Interview- Iris- *The Island*

This *book* stimulated Iris's concern regarding territorial superiority and insular thinking. The cover (see Section 3.3.1) depicts a large wall the islanders erect to keep out strangers following their experiences of welcoming a stranger to the island. Such an approach seems to run counter to her thinking as she explains that we are all the same. As Hyde posits, 'children weave together threads of meaning and that they draw from a range of alternative frameworks of meaning from personal experience, wonderings, and television' (2008, p.424) and this can be seen here as Iris draws parallels between the wall the islanders build around them and the news at the time the research was carried out, that President Trump wanted to create a wall between the US and Mexico. It almost seemed to replicate the text and she was keen to share her mediated understanding of this. Whilst the picture book doesn't explore the wall being erected, as it comes at the end it is reflected on the front cover, and is an issue on Iris's mind.

The group shared the opinion that the book resonates with the UK's decision to leave the EU which may have prompted Iris to say that we are all the same and that we will not have any countries to turn to. Such news clearly affects children's understanding of the world and their place in it. Iris may be reflecting a concern that the world may change as the result of what she has heard in the news, and the themes in the story have produced a moment in which deep reflection on this can occur. Iris's concern for others is felt in the dialogue as she blurs the line between art and reality; she uses the story of the islander where he was refused food and basic humanity to refer to real refugees, as she says that if they need food from us, we should let them in to get it. The book represents a particular fictional situation but allows the reader to draw their own opinions and create their own point of view, as Iris clearly demonstrates in her humanitarian and passionate plea. All of this may be deemed characteristic of the potential synergy between picture book fiction and developing aspects of spirituality in children.

Iris also discusses a part in the picture book where a fisherman on the island makes a brave attempt to speak with the islanders about how their behaviour towards the stranger is not humane (see Image 4J). Iris uses this to begin a reflection on why the islanders treated another human in such a way as a result of how he looked. To support her understanding of such a complex and demanding concept she relates it to her own experience and understanding by comparing it to a hypothetical situation where a disabled child arrives at the school in a wheelchair. She identifies with the fisherman and contends she would behave similarly and be proud to stand up for such a child and welcome her/him to the school. To treat another human less favourably because of disability or difference seems anathema to Iris. Through contemplating the fictional actions of the fisherman, and interpreting the way the islanders treated the stranger, she is able to relate this to her reality and form individual meaning from such reflection.



Image 4J *The Island*

#### 4.4.4 Summary

I have entered into hermeneutical dialogue through reflecting, interpreting and contemplating the phenomenological essences and experiences of the three children in the study; and in so doing reflected upon the relationship between picture books and the potential synergy for meaning making and developing worldviews. This, I argue, is an expression of spirituality as outlined in my definition of spirituality in chapter 1, which views spirituality as a concern for ultimate meaning and that it can be expressed relationally through the mind and senses.

#### 4.5 Spirituality as Existential Musing

The third and final significant statement of children's expressions of spirituality emerging from the data was the capacity for existential musing. Children were keen to share their interest in and understanding of existential thought regarding the injustice of racism, xenophobia and why people are treated differently. The children appeared keen to ponder life's essential meanings and to express their views on heaven, God, the soul and why potentially tragic events and behaviours in the world take place. They seem keen to wonder and discuss aspects pertaining to the metaphysical such as the soul, spirit and the aura, despite the picture books not explicitly discussing such, I begin my consideration of their expressions of existential musing with Harry's text.

#### 4.5.1 Hermeneutic Text: Harry

Harry discussed the fact that the dog in the *BLBHS* was saved from going to heaven, yet he felt like he was in heaven, as he had a new and loving home.

Harry: It's, kind of, like who the person is. The soul is everything that you don't see in a person, from the outside. As Fatima was saying, the souls rise up, it's because, like, your body is left here but your soul, your person, goes up.

Interviewer: So, you say it goes up, to where?

Harry: To heaven.

Extract 4U Group interview- Harry- *BLBHS*

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

The children were keen to discuss their understanding of the images in 4K below. This part of the story contrasts how the dog when in the dog shelter was once destined to go through a particular green door which led to heaven. This was a door through which dogs went when nobody wanted them. Conversely, the dog now feels perhaps he has actually gone through the green door into heaven as he has found such happiness in his new life with his owner George. The juxtaposition between the pictures, which depict George's loneliness, and the plight of the dog, hours from being put to sleep because he was unwanted, and the harmony in the picture as they snuggle into an armchair together, is striking.

The book does not mention the abstract and complex concept of a human or animal soul, but this came up in the group discussion from Fatima, and Harry was keen to develop his understanding of it further. Such a profound statement as 'your soul goes up' suggests that Harry believes heaven to be a place above him and, interestingly, he says that souls rise up and your body remains. To unpick this statement, I suggest that Harry has a strong internal understanding of the metaphysical concept of the soul. He identifies the personality in the body as being essentially of soul quality and it is this and not the body that is freed at the point of death and enters into heaven. The story, mentioning only the word heaven without either an explanation or picture has allowed Harry to fill the gaps left and weave his own existential musing on the matter of heaven. Harry's wonderings about death, heaven and

the soul echo empirical research findings that ‘children are natural philosophers... and often wonder about the big questions...they ask about life and meaning, knowing and knowledge, truth and justice, reality and death’ (Hart, 2003, p.91).



Image 4K- *The BLBHS*

**Harry:** It is like really strange why somebody would want that much power, just because, because like he doesn't like a religion, he can say you will die. It's like he thinks he is in charge of the world.

Extract 4V Group Interview- Harry- *The Harmonica*

In exploring the picture book, *The Harmonica*, Harry considers the philosophical reasoning why some people have power over others. He is contemplating how the hatred of a religious group, namely the Jews in this example, can lead to such horrific questions. How and why this could happen is certainly on Harry's mind as he discusses the misuse of power and religious intolerance. His tone is one of incredulity that the power of life and death can be in the hands of one man, a Nazi guard and I deem this pondering existential.



| Observation  | Reflection and Interpretation  |
|--|--|
| <p>The teacher shares an image with the class and states that the commandant is not portrayed in a good light and that he has dogs next to him and a whip in his hand.</p> <p>The teacher discusses with children the moral dilemma the boy finds himself in; he has to play the beautiful music of Schubert to a guard who kills. Secondly, how the boy can reconcile surviving on the scraps of bread when the others around him starve.</p> | <p>Harry appears engrossed in the reading and his facial expressions appear to reflect the difficult situation in which the boy in the book finds himself.</p> <p>In partnered discussion Harry expresses incredulity and shock at how the guard treats the boy and how he misuses his power.</p> <p>Harry appears to grasp the philosophical issues around power, also the nature of beauty and ugliness in people.</p> |
| Extract 4W Classroom Observation <i>The Harmonica</i>  |  |

Such existential musing continues in Extract 4W. Here he discusses the image of a Nazi guard who points a finger to the left or right and in that moment, it is life for some and death for others. In observing Harry, I noted how he became aware of the structures of power and its corruptive nature. To begin to ponder on these matters of existential thought can lead to profound and deep moments of learning. Classroom observation reflects how he internalises the narrative of the picture book that the Nazi guard beat the Jews relentlessly and worked them hard for no reason. Harry's reflections are suggestive of wondering how a human could exhibit such cruelty and, secondly through his partner discussions, about the guilt the boy felt at receiving scraps of food for playing music whilst others starved. The moral and philosophical reasoning involved in these discussions show how picture books can stimulate such discussions. Such a concern for the human condition is enhanced through literature which can expose 'children to confront events and decisions beyond their everyday experiences' (Cottingham, 2005, p.49).

I now turn to reflect on Fatima's experience of picture books and to explore the essence of her spirituality as existential musing.

#### 4.5.2 Hermeneutic Text: Fatima

Far from eschewing the difficult questions of life, children, Hart (2003) argues, are natural philosophers and muse about existential issues. Fatima illustrates this as I noted in my reflective journal:

I was surprised today by how much the children explored the metaphysical aspects of spirituality. In particular F who spoke about the soul. There was no mention in the book about this but clearly something she was exploring and thinking about.

Extract 4X Researcher Reflective Research Journal Entry following Group Interview session *BLBHS*

### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

I noted at the end of the first group interview session connected to teaching centred around *The BLBHS* how open the children appeared to be to talk about the metaphysical aspects of spirituality. I was surprised that the children mentioned the soul and were happy to explore this despite the picture book not even implicitly mentioning this. Fatima explores this further in Extract 4Y.

I think the soul is a part of you that you can't really get rid of. It's how you [Crosstalk 0:22:04].  
No. I think, at the end of time, the last day, maybe it goes up to heaven.  
The souls rise up, it's because, like, your body is left here but your soul, your person, goes up.  
But the soul is basically how you feel, it makes you- You know, people say you have, like a sad soul, that's not a good thing, like, you always want a happy It's really amazing how, like, just by looking at a person you can tell, like, what they are and who they really are and what they're like. soul.  
This book shows that life can actually be literally like heaven.

Extract 4Y Group Interview- Fatima- *BLBHS*

Here, Fatima is dealing with the complex issue of what the soul is and how it operates. Such abstraction would be difficult for adults to tackle yet she does it with gusto. She sees the soul as inextricably linked to the person and says that you can't get rid of it. She is contemplating or musing on whether heaven exists but feels that your soul leaves the body and goes upward. This was a common observation from all three children, and perhaps is a western construct they have met through conversations with their parents? Fatima links the soul and personality, that the soul can be happy or sad, and discusses what it may be like to peer into somebody's soul to discover the kind of person they may be. Such authentic and open displays of thinking about challenging abstract concepts reflect the children's enthusiasm and capacity to consider these. She goes on to state that this book is actually an example of what heaven is like and goes as far as saying that *The BLBHS* is reflective of life in heaven, hinting that heaven is a place where happy endings occur and



Jeremy the dog and George find love and happiness in their friendship. She continues her reflections and musings about the human heart in the following response.

He was really lonely and he had a hole in his heart because he had no-one who really did love him. His grandma did love him, but, like, she wasn't able to do as much stuff- She didn't have the same love feeling that your parents would usually have. He went to a dog shelter and he found- He [wanted to love 0:02:12] eighty-three dogs, I think. He went to the last one, and all of the other dogs were fine and they had four legs, but this particular dog actually had three legs and he was very weak and sad.

Extract 4Z Group interview-Fatima- *BLBHS*

Here, Fatima talks about George having a hole in his heart which suggests that she can discern the poetic and metaphysical element in feeling and emotion. She interprets the author's idea that loneliness can be conceptualised through the heart and realises that George's heart is incomplete with a hole in the absence of loving parents despite the love of his grandmother. This reflection illustrates the conceptual process of Fatima's developing thinking around issues of love and loneliness, themes considered existential in nature. She continues this deep level of reflection when she discusses the picture book *The Island* in Extract 4.1.A.

I think that the way the schoolteacher... I think he wanted to try and scare the pupils about the man so that they'll probably [listen 0:06:33] more things about him. Let's say like on the next page it says, 'A mother actually scared the child with him,' and people weren't looking, just did that because of his appearance. I think that's wrong.

I think this is really, really wrong because nobody deserves to be treated in that way, even if they've done something probably really, really bad. The man in the story didn't actually do anything wrong; he just wanted... He was hungry, like Iris said; all he wanted was some food. Putting him in a goat's pen wasn't the right way to treat him

I think he's a very strong man and I think he likes to fight for what he believes in, like I think he fought for the right thing; he doesn't... I think he's a very kind man and he gives other people a chance, no matter what their appearance is, or how they look, or how they act. He gives people a go, like he did for this stranger, because although he could have been with the islanders and all of them could have just thrown him out into the sea, but he was actually nice enough to actually fight for him.

Extract 4.1.A Group interview-Fatima- *The Island*

In this response Fatima ponders on the meaning of status and power and how this is used and manifested in ways that surprise her. One of the striking elements to the picture book *The Island* is the response of islanders in positions of power and authority who could have supported the stranger. Unsurprisingly, she discusses the response of the teacher as it is somebody to whom she can relate. She seems surprised that the teacher spread and

fuelled the rumours that the stranger was dangerous and scary. Fatima reflects on this with surprise as she perceives the teacher should be supporting the children to better understand the stranger and feels slightly perturbed that a person should be judged on their appearance alone.

Fatima further ponders on issues of morality and how people should be treated even if they have behaved badly. She attempts to synthesise and rationalise the treatment of the stranger as it appears to conflict with her own worldview and narrative. She indignantly asks how could he be placed in a goat's pen simply for existing and arriving on the island. Such ponderings are at the heart of existential reasoning.

Conversely, Fatima is just as able to be discerning about the behaviour and norms she herself considers acceptable. Her admiration for the lone voice of the fisherman is palpable. She commends the fisherman for standing up for what was the right and proper way to behave against the islanders' behaviour. She is exploring issues which go to the heart of the human condition and how people should treat one another and the darker side when this does not happen. She seems disturbed that the fisherman and his boat were burnt and set out to sea for making a stand for decency. Using stories as a method for supporting children's spiritual views was a by-product of Hyde's (2008) research, and clearly here Fatima is using the story as a framework to explore existential musing such as what the soul is and where does it go after death. I argue these are all characteristics of spiritual expression and philosophising about life and the metaphysical realms of spirituality.

I now turn to reflect on Iris' experience of picture books and to explore the essence of her spirituality as existential musing.

#### 4.5.3 Hermeneutic Text: Iris

Children, Hyde (2008) argues, have a fascination with the metaphysical aspects of spirituality, and are keen to explore the themes of astrology, clairvoyance and have a fascination with the supernatural, these are hitherto unexplored areas of spirituality in empirical research. This is relevant here as in Extract 4.1.B Iris begins a discussion on her understanding and conceptualisation of the soul, reflecting her existential pondering.

I, kind of, feel- I always wondered if that if you, kind of, walked around and you had no faith, it was just, like, your soul walking around and you could meet them from that, it would, kind of, the real people who care are because you would still be friends. If some people would just be, like, "Oh, no," I would be, like, "No, I don't like your personality really, just because, when I saw you, you were nice, you looked nice." So if you were still friends with the same people that would, kind of, show who you are.

If you couldn't see any of that, you could just see their soul, you could just read what they were inside, they were really, kind of, maybe weren't, like, didn't have the best sense of fashion or anything but you still shouldn't [Crosstalk 0:23:46].

Going all the way back to Harry how, like, it's real life because, like, if he slipped, it would be perfect in heaven, I think that this is heaven for him because, if he slipped, they wouldn't have realised that he needed another leg, so he never would have got, like, a [purple 0:27:14] \_\_\_\_ leg, a [dough] leg, he never would have got any of that. He would have just been, like, \_\_\_\_ it would be luxury, but he will never have the adventures of trying out all his new legs.

Extract 4.1.B Group Interview- Iris- *BLBHS*

### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Iris ponders on an interesting spiritual concept of what would it be like if we could effectively see into people's souls and gain a true perspective of their character. The discussion about heaven has led to Iris considering what the soul is. She clearly demonstrates here that for her it is the true person, the real self. She plays out an interesting dialogue where one can see her thinking developing. She contemplates whether the people who consider themselves to be your friends would still be if you could venture in and see their true selves, their souls. Iris adds that people should consider personality and not appearance in discerning friendships. She appears to be contemplating the value of people and friends and that it should come from personality and feeling as opposed to fashion and outward appearances.

She further muses on heaven and whether the dog's new fun-filled world is reminiscent of what heaven is like. The picture book adds humour to the story as George and his grandmother are involved in a number of makeshift legs for the dog from pastry to papier-maché (see Images 4L). Such love is warm and happy and Iris makes an emotional assessment whether the dog is in fact present in heaven as he has all he ever dreamed of. She contemplates what might have happened had he not been taken home by George and missed out on all the adventures and new legs. Such a profundity of thought as to contemplate heaven suggests that children are in need of expressing and articulating an

inner spirituality (O' Murchú, 2000) and that picture books may offer an opportunity for this to flourish. Iris continues her reflection on the existential in discussing the picture book *The Harmonica* in Extract 4.1.C below.



Image 4L *The BLBHS*

Like, he was in a concentration camp among, like, so many people, and even when he was playing it for the man, like, when he got food, he didn't play for the man, he played for joy. He didn't play for food and stuff, because it says in here how he felt guilty when he took his food and other people were starving

I don't think so, because he knows that if he didn't play he would have died, and because they would have killed him. Because it says in one of the pages that, like, one wrong note and he would be, like, dead, so he didn't play for joy. He played for, like, mercy, kind of.

I don't think anyone's completely evil, but I think that if he wanted to appreciate the boy, he shouldn't do it with a whip in his hand. He should maybe take the boy into a nice room, calming, like he certainly shouldn't still be in a Nazi uniform. Like, calm him down and, like, comfort him, and then just say, "Play." Like, not, "Play, Jew, play," it should be, like, "Whenever you're ready," because the boy's doing it for him. He's doing it for a sliver of bread, but he said, like, "Play, Jew, play," and he thinks he looks like he's really happy in the photo, but I think what would make him even more happy, if he was nicer to the boy. Because kindness, it's like giving a present feels nicer than receiving one.

Yes, so it's like he's playing, and then he's keeping in touch with his old self

It's kind of, like, their personality is more memorable than their face. Like, I forget, it was either the last one or the one before, about the people's souls, it's, like, reaching into the souls. So he really, like, dug down deep, and he just like skipped past all the emotions, and the face, and just jumped right into their love and care.

It's almost as if, like, music was his heart and soul. Instead of having his heart inside of him, he was holding it in his pocket, because even, like, it brought his family together when they sung. So without music I don't think he would even have made it to the concentration camp without his parents

Extract 4.1.C Group Interview-Iris- The *Harmonica*

Here, Iris begins discussing the relationship between good and evil: in this situation, the beauty of the music played by the Jewish child and the evil acts committed by the Nazi guard. She ponders on how this is possible: how can such a man commit atrocities yet be appreciative of Schubert? She considers that the child played for mercy, a reprieve from being hit, humiliated and even killed in exchange for playing the harmonica, a precious gift given to him by his family before the horrors of war arrived. Despite the graphic and upsetting descriptions of the treatment of the boy, Iris fails to believe that any one person can be completely evil and rather than recall his acts, she lists the things he should do such as taking him to a quiet room and saying play when you are ready. This redemptive and forgiving nature and belief in humanity is powerfully told. Her worldview is clear: kindness always triumphs and is a powerful antidote to reading the wartime events in the picture book.

Iris is also absorbed in considering that the harmonica has sentimental value to the Jewish boy, that it acts as a bridge between the life before the war and his current predicament since it is a reminder of the music he played when surrounded by his parents' love. She ponders on why the child feels he can't remember his parents' faces; and adds that he is digging deep into his soul and from there he will remember the emotions and love, so remembering faces is not important.

To Iris, the beauty of music is what saved the Jewish boy, both physically and mentally. Music lived and breathed in him, it was his heart and soul. Again, Iris is furthering her understanding of two spiritually abstract concepts, the soul and the heart, and how they produce emotion, beauty and memories. Music, in her view, saved the boy from death and allowed him to rebuild a new life after the war. Such ponderings are representative of a deepening awareness of the world and its people and are illustrative of expressions of spirituality.

#### 4.5.4 Summary

This section has presented the data relating to how children expressed their spirituality as existential musing. This reflects their capacities for exploring spiritual concepts which underpins the definition of spirituality outlined in chapter 1 as being transcendental and also through the Divine. Hermeneutic reflection and interpretation presented as texts, on the children's extracts from observations and interviews, suggest that picture book stories provide potential opportunities and spaces for the spiritual exploration of often complex and metaphysical concepts.

#### 4.6 Discussion of Findings

##### 4.6.1 Introduction

In this section I provide a detailed discussion of the findings in this chapter related to the first of my research questions; how children express their spirituality while engaged with picture books in the classroom. My data analysis identified that children expressed their spirituality through empathic sensitivity and concern for the human condition; through spirituality as a form of meaning making to understand themselves and others and in formulating a worldview; and as a form of existential musing, where the children offered explanations and reasons for abstract spiritual ideas such as heaven and the soul. Through creating children's hermeneutic texts, I present my hermeneutic reflection and interpretative dialogue with the phenomenon of children's experience of picture books and their expressions of spirituality. The textual descriptions illustrate the horizontal engagement between my own understanding as a researcher and the experiences of the children and from this meaning emerges. I now consider each of the three thematic areas of spiritual expression and link these to the body of literature outlined in chapter 2. A full analysis of how picture books themselves as a unique form of literature and the effect they had on children's responses to the texts is set out and discussed in chapter 5 in section 5.1.

##### 4.6.2 Spirituality as Concern for the Human Condition and Empathy

My study's findings confirm previous empirical research in the field that children express their spirituality relationally, relating it to themselves, others, nature and a higher being

(Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008). The data reflects that children overwhelmingly responded empathetically and appeared to make strong connections with the fictional characters in the three picture books. All the children showed evidence of this and Fatima exemplifies this in Extract 4G, where she responds to the picture book *The Island* and connects the degrading treatment of the stranger with her own fortuitous position to live freely in the UK. She empathises with characters through drawing upon a personal analogy to explain this (Arizpe and Styles, 2016), and may also be connecting to her own stored emotional memories. She may, as Nikolajeva (2002) argues, be *misattributing* her emotions to the fictional character in the story; Nikolajeva posits that when we engage with fictional characters, we make connections between the mediated experience of the text and emotional memories stored in the brain.

Observations of Harry's responses to the story *BLBHS* in Extract 4A demonstrate the subtle oscillation between Harry recognising the loneliness of the character and relating this to actual life. Nikolajeva postulates that reading picture books prepares children for dealing with empathy and that 'images of characters help us understand people's emotions in real-life' (2013, p. 25). Harry may in fact be using his own mirror neurons (Iacoboni, 2008) in connecting to how George the character feels and internalising this sensitively into his own emotions, which in turn can be deemed spiritual in their expression. This is reminiscent of his responses to *The Island* in Extract 4C where he weaves the concept of bullying into the story to reflect the treatment of the stranger at the hands of the islanders. Harry doesn't articulate if he has received any such prejudice yet there is a 'dynamic interplay of signals from mirror neurons which allow a feeling of reciprocity with others whilst maintaining a sense of individuality' (Ramachandran, 2011, p.291).

Several empirical picture book studies highlight the affective response of pupils' engagement with fiction (Arizpe, 2015; Arizpe and Styles, 2016; Evans, 2016). My study confirms this, and goes further in claiming that this empathetic response is an aspect of children's expressions of spirituality. The children in my study often made profound emotional responses to the character's life experiences such as Harry in extract 4D where he showed concern for the child in *the Harmonica*; he demonstrated the capacity children have for value-sensing (Hay and Nye, 1998), an aspect of spiritual sensitivity.

During the research Fatima demonstrated how she felt the injustice of the stranger who entered the island to a barrage of hostility. In Extract 4G she demonstrated a capacity for empathy and compassion which echoes Hart's view that 'children have the capacity to be deeply empathetic and compassionate and can feel or share in the pain of others' (2003, p.69). Fatima's response is indicative of the empathic concern for the human condition that is a feature of my definition of spirituality in chapter 1 which frames spirituality as concern for the human condition reflected through the mind and the senses. Similar layers of empathy and concern for the characters in the picture books were expressed by Iris, who also responded compassionately to how the stranger was treated in *The Island* in extract 4M, effectively expressing what Hart (2003) deems as a moral compass by rejecting a racist and xenophobic attitude hinted at in the story towards another human and drawing it into real life situations she is, I argue, demonstrating an intense moment of spiritual expression which also demonstrates 'empathic resonance'.

Iris continues her concern for others while expressing her incredulity at how the stranger in the picture book wanted food yet was stigmatised as a criminal; she exhibits a form of 'reflexive empathy' (Cottingham, 2004) when she examines her own life, beliefs and attitudes in light of their understanding of other people's lives. One of the most powerful moments in the research came when Iris began to explore how a Nazi guard could treat a young Jewish child in a concentration camp so badly, whilst appreciating beautiful music. Contrasting such light and shade, beauty and death, strikes at the heart of what it means to be human, and Iris shows an enhanced empathetic awareness (Extract 4I). Such profound empathy is suggestive of a 'heightened awareness and sense of awe and wonder, provoking a tussle with the great questions of life and feeling at one with others and the wider cosmos' (Cooper, 2013, p.230).

A new insight emerging from my study was how the deliberate use of story supported the space through which empathic responses emerged, which are characteristic of spiritual expression. Other studies into picture books have recognised affective and empathetic responses (Arizpe and Styles, 2016; Evans, 2016) and empirical studies into spirituality have argued that empathic responses form part of spiritual expression (Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008); however, my study suggests that the principal use of story can create a space for children to express spirituality through empathy. Fatima exemplifies such a space in Extract 4H, when she contemplated the feelings of how the islander is treated. She shows



here, the power of picture books as a form of literature has ‘enormous educational potential; it can enable children to experience a range of emotions safely and vicariously, promote understanding of the human condition [...] It can be a source of reflection on universal themes of courage, love, sacrifice, compassion’ (Gamble, 2007, p.96).

The power of the stories in the picture books allowed children to experience a range of emotions and demanded sophisticated reasoned responses which Harry reflects when discussing how the islanders lacked moral courage. He explains in Extract 40 how the islanders set fire to the stranger’s boat and sent him back out to sea. Harry reasons morally on this point and contrasts how the islanders had plenty and the stranger was desperate for food and comfort. Such moral, ethical and sensitive issues are indicative of spiritual discussion as ‘stories invite children to enter a world not their own, vicariously to identify with story’s characters and their situations, thus stimulating their emotions, the imaginations, cognitive powers and moral reasoning’ (Trousdale, 2004, p.185). It may be contended that what my research adds to the body of literature is the enhanced power of pictures and words on the reader’s spirituality: ‘I argue that all three children were exposed to what Evans (2018) describes as challenging content in the picture books. The children were confronted with themes such as the Holocaust, xenophobia and racism. Iris exemplifies how the pictures and words had a profound effect on her as described in Extract 41. She was visibly moved by the roles of responsibility and the Nazi guard’s treatment of the Jewish boy in the picture book *The Harmonica* and such a reaction reflects a profound empathic response.

#### 4.6.3 Spirituality as Meaning Making and Developing a Worldview

The second finding in the study was spirituality as meaning making and developing a worldview. Meaning making has been a central tenet of children’s expressions of spirituality in many empirical studies (Hay and Nye, 1998; Kendall, 1999; Hyde, 2008) and this research has further confirmed this, adding a further layer of understanding by highlighting the value of imagination and story as being fundamental to the process of thinking and ordering experience *per se*. Children in the study frequently demonstrated that they were not only reading the texts but in fact reading the world and actively making sense of it (Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995). The picture books selected, reflected disparate

and polemic themes and the use of story supported the young people as they made sense of these and related their own lives to the situations explored within them. Children frequently engaged in aesthetic reading of the picture books where they attended to a range of problems or worries that they needed to make sense of by bringing themselves to the text (Rosenblatt, 1995).

Fatima engaged very strongly with the picture book *BLBHS* and in Extract 4Q she exemplifies the three impulses which guide children's responses to picture books (Sipe, 2008). These impulses are central to meaning making. Firstly, she enters the story with a hermeneutic impulse or desire to know about the story; she reflects this understanding by not only grappling with the issues of loneliness and appearance in the story, but moves to the second impulse, the need to connect the story to her own life. She explains how appearances can be deceptive and begins to tell her story oscillating between talking about animals and humans and her feeling that being judged on your appearance is unfair. The third impulse is to shape the story and make it your own. Fatima enters her own narrative explaining that people should adopt animals. Such narrative imagining evidences that literacy and its capacity is 'indispensable to human cognition' (Turner, 1996, p.5).

The data thus confirm that narrative and storying reflect a way of thinking and ordering experience; as Hardy (1988) contends. I argue that narrative allows the mind to grapple with meaning and make sense of it from a personal perspective and that such meaning making from experience is characteristic of spirituality. The data supports this argument: Fatima's engagement with the *BLBHS* demonstrates how she uses the story to order and understand not the themes in the story, but her own life and worries. She effectively brings her narrative to the picture books when in Extract 4R she departs from the theme of loneliness in the story to discuss her friendships and how modern society pressures young people to conform. I argue that here Fatima is making sense of the world and how it works, and relates it to her own story; she works out a way of coping with this and reassures the group that you need to be yourself. The extent to which storying generates and orders meaning develops in her response to the picture book *The Island* when she voices a strong worldview about treating all people fairly. This reinforces the findings of Erricker et al. who argue that 'children possess an inner narrative or worldview and that truth may be related to personal narrative constructed out of individual experience' (1997, p.9).

Fatima moves from the story about the treatment of the stranger to contextualise it. She firmly believes people in Europe and Africa are unwelcome and that this is not right. Such a deep concern exposes her 'concern for issues such as conflict, loss, and parental separation, ethnic and religious identity' (Erricker, 1997, p.60). Fatima also draws on her intertextual skills to understand the issues of xenophobia and racism in the picture books and moves from the abstract to the practical by using metaphor and analogies with fictional characters fleeing their country in a class novel. Here the story from the novel is projected by Fatima onto the picture book creating a form of parable. Fatima goes on to use story to support her thoughts and feelings around the theme of immigration and links it to her personal opinion regarding how the EU failed to admit Turkey. Storying appears to offer Fatima a metaphor for grounding often abstract and symbolic representations of experience and thought into intelligible understandings. Fatima is using the story to better understand herself and others (Oatley, 2011) and reformulating her worldview. She is effectively imagining the world she wants to see, exemplifying Turner's view that 'literacy capacity is indispensable to human cognition' (Turner, 1996, p. 5).

The data reveal that children often expressed an understanding of their place and position in the world in relation to complex social problems. Fatima in Extract 4R reflected her concern for children in her school that were suffering a similar fate of loneliness to George in the *BLBHS* and she spoke about her work to help them. She exhibits 'a little person inside me' Ng (2012) to reflect upon and think about their place and understanding in the world.

Iris, in her response to the picture book *The Island*, showed agreement with other studies where children in their expressions of spirituality 'drew from an eclectic range of different frameworks such as story, television and personal experiences, and used these to weave together meanings and to develop a personal framework of meaning' (Hyde, 2008, p.122). In Extract 4T Iris weaves together an understanding from the story and elements she has acquired from listening to the news. She likens the story in the picture book to the news that Trump is attempting to build a wall round the country to prohibit immigrants entering. This holds clear parallels to the story and is something that is of concern to her. She effectively re-writes a virtual or parallel text to the one read and is arguably, Iser (1980) words 'filling in the gaps' that have been left by the author and illustrator.

Iris's discussions in the group support her own meaning and are characteristic of an interior persuasiveness discourse, a type of discourse which is malleable and borderless; such a discourse allows words to 'awaken new and independent worlds' (Bakhtin, 1981, p.345). To support her meaning and understanding of the concepts of rejection and fear of strangers, she uses her imagination and draws upon a metaphor of how she would deal with such a situation of difference through a discussion of a child arriving in a wheelchair in her class. Here the wheelchair, which doesn't appear in the story, acts as a metaphor for difference and leads her to understanding the role of a fisherman in the story who tried to stand up to the angry mob of islanders and lost. This sits comfortably with Erricker et al; (1997) findings that metaphor and imagination are key tools in allowing children to talk about difficulties in an uninhibited way. The data indicate how children entered into a transaction with the picture books to generate meaning. In Extract 4S Iris attempts to explore her understanding of loneliness and brings her own life experiences to the reading where she talks about how loneliness exists at school if girls do not have the correct phone or image; she states there is a lot of pressure to conform to a certain artificial standard. Here Iris uses the themes in the picture book and draws upon her own experiences and creates what Rosenblatt (1995) states is a 'live circuit set up between reader and text: the reader infuses intellectual and social meanings into the pattern of verbal symbols, and those verbal symbols channel his thoughts and feelings' (1995, p.24). Iris infuses the themes in the picture book channelling her own thoughts and feelings into them.

#### 4.6.4 Spirituality as Existential Musing

The third finding reflected in the data was that children expressed their spirituality as existential musing. This took the form of speaking about questions related to the very nature of humanity. Where previous research had indicated that children related their spirituality to God (Hay and Nye, 1998), and Hart (2003) hinted at the need to explore children's more metaphysical spiritual nature; my study reveals how through discussing heaven, the soul, and human behaviour, the children showed they have a capacity for introspection.

Children often expressed their spirituality through existential musing while reading picture books. None of the selected texts were of an overt religious or spiritual nature, yet many

conversations in the group interviews revealed the children's desire to tackle often abstract spiritual concepts. Harry discusses in Extract 4U the idea of the soul as being everything that you can't see in a person. The conversation continued with a discussion about how the soul goes up to heaven. This suggests a close connection to my definition of spirituality as being innate and seeking expression. Harry exemplifies how children are at ease and even eager to discuss existential concepts when he considers that the heart can be lonely and is an emotional as well as physical organ. Fatima similarly was at ease discussing the soul as analogous to a person and on the last day of your life it raises up to heaven (Extract 4Y). She distinguishes between happy and sad souls and discusses an idea of everything being happy in heaven. These discussions led to children being able to empathise with characters, take 'big questions' about existence, and work collaboratively. Iris considers the idea of seeing inside the soul and ascertaining the true nature of a person's character and distinguishes between material and spiritual values in people. This supports the research literature that posits children are natural philosophers and that they contemplate the big questions in life linked to reality and death, truth and justice. Hart believes it is 'children's openness, vulnerability and tolerance for mystery that enable them to entertain perplexing and paradoxical questions' (2003, p.93).

The children appeared to have strong views around existential musings of right and wrong actions as they perceived them. Similar to empirical research by Ng (2012), children appeared to create worlds through which they could express their spirituality; the Emotive World, where they discussed their concerns and worries for themselves, families and society; the Existential World, where they sought to tackle injustices and make the world better and the World of Concern, where power and influence were discussed (Ng, 2012). The children in my study also appear to exhibit characteristics of *value-sensing* which pertains to children's morality, and their sense of right and wrong, good and evil, is associated with delight and despair and reflected through their emotions (Hay and Nye, 1998).

#### 4.7 Summary of Chapter 4

This chapter has addressed the first research question, how children expressed their spirituality while engaged with picture books in the primary classroom. I entered into a

hermeneutic conversation, through reflecting and interpreting upon the children's experiences in interviews and observations. My pre-understanding of spirituality articulated in chapter 1, which incorporates concern for the human condition and ultimate meaning of life, and my understanding of literature supported the conversation. It also defined spirituality as being inbuilt and seeking expression through the mind and senses. From my findings children articulated such spirituality in three principle ways:

- Spirituality as **Empathy and Concern for the Human Condition**
- Spirituality as **Meaning Making and Developing a Worldview**
- Spirituality as **Existential Musing**

The first finding that emerged was that children expressed their spirituality as empathy and concern for the human condition. Children's responses to picture books reflected an empathy with characters and they were often concerned with how characters were feeling and enduring experiences. They frequently related this empathy to themselves and their own lives, re-creating their own story.

The thesis is driven by the use of story as a way of nurturing children's spiritual experiences. The importance of story as a way of ordering experience and in fact as a way of thinking (Turner, 1996) led to the second of the thesis' findings. Children often expressed their spirituality as a way of meaning making and developing their own worldviews. The story offered a space for children to think about their own ideas and led them to understand themes in the books.

The third finding emerging from the study was how children expressed their spirituality as a form of existential musing. Using the picture book stories as constructs to explore and reflect on life, children made many insightful and thoughtful comments on existential understanding. Data findings unveiled some tentative new insights into how children expressed their spirituality in this context. The power of story in children's lives emerged as a way of ordering thinking and a tool to foster empathy and existential musing. Having established how children express their spirituality I now turn to identify how the picture books themselves and how the teacher's use of them, affects such expressions of spirituality.

‘Text is just ink on a page until the reader comes along and gives it life’  
Rosenblatt (1995, p.253)

### 5.1 Introduction

This chapter seeks to answer the second of my research questions: How do picture books and the teacher’s use of them support children’s expressions of spirituality?

### 5.2 Significant Statements and Clustered Meanings into Themes

As explained in chapter 3, for this research question I selected one of the three children in the study, Iris, as a hermeneutic case study. This had multiple benefits. I was able to present a detailed hermeneutic reflection on Iris’s experiences with picture books and the teacher’s use of them. Iris captured many similar moments and experiences to the other two participants and so I was able to contextualise them in the one hermeneutic text. Her experiences straddle data over both research questions and capture the heart of the research questions. Focusing upon one of the children allowed deeper essences, hermeneutic meanings and reflections to emerge more fully. The significant and substantial amount of rich data produced by hermeneutic reflection thus justifies the selection of Iris’s hermeneutic texts through which to analyse the data.

| Research Question 2<br>Area of Focus                      | Significant Thematic Meanings from<br>Hermeneutic Texts  | Evidence Examples   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Picture Books</b>                                      | A. Picture Books and the Use of Colour and Perspective in Illustrations to Support Meaning                                       | 'Because, like, light and dark almost represent happiness and sadness. When you're said you're almost, like, dull and not as bright and joyful as you would be when, if someone was bright, then they would be happy....' <i>F Response to BLBHS – Group Interview</i>  |
|   | B. Connecting Images and Words to their Own Understanding- Constructing a 'Dual' Narrative from a Combination of Word and Images | 'Then here it's darker, and it's more grey, and all the dark people around. Then here you can just slightly see like, that's where they, kind of, used to be, so there's all the hope and happiness, and then it's, like, slowly coming into the darkness. Then there's the hope, because that's where he is, and then the brutal, everything, death.' <i>F Response to BLBHS – Group Interview</i> |
|   | C. Affective Responses- (How Images Affected an Emotional Response)  | I think it would be quite a bad atmosphere because, if you relate it to real life, if a foreign person came on a plane and you arrived with pitchforks, chasing you and questioning you of where you came from, and just throwing you away to a goat pen... <i>H Response to Photo B in The Island during Group Interview</i>   |
|   | D. Images and Words Supported an Understanding of Abstract and Complex Concepts  | The way I would see, like, an easier way to describe, like, the soul in a person, from my point of view, would be like, a book. The person is the book but then all their personalities and like, how they care is all the words inside. <i>H Response to Photo A in BLBHS during Group Interview.</i>  |
| <b>Teacher Pedagogy</b><br>(Teacher use of Picture Books) | A. Teacher Adopts a Personal Growth Model of Teaching  | I hope if we were to welcome strangers in, we would look after them. I know in this class we have a lot of empathy. <b>22.50 – Observation of Classroom Teaching with The Island</b>  |
|   | B. Teacher Enters into Aesthetic Reading with the Class  | 'When I read this (story) I thought the image and text was so powerful' <b>08.55 – Observation of Classroom Teaching with The Harmonica</b>   |
|   | C. Teacher Values Personal and Aesthetic Responses from the Children   | To explain the phrase 'Snapped like kindling' in the text <i>The Harmonica</i> where a family are torn apart quickly the teacher refers to a residential trip they had been on and used kindling to light a fire, to contextualise and draw upon their own experience to foster understanding. <b>08.00 – Observation of Classroom Teaching with The Harmonica</b>                                  |
|   | D. Teacher Uses Language and Talk as Symbolic Mediation  | Teacher deals with symbolic representation of a hole or space inside a character: 'This is an emotional and not a physical hole. It's a void where emotions are kept. How could the grandmother see this?' <b>15:59-16:33 Observation of Classroom Teaching with BLBHS</b>  |

Table 5.1: Significant Statements Table

As in the data analysis process for chapter 4, I read and re-read the data transcripts of classroom observations, group interviews and my research journal. I highlighted significant statements that occurred frequently. From these, themes began to emerge. Four significant thematic areas were identified for the first strand of the question; about how picture books themselves support children's expressions of spirituality including: the use of colour and perspective in illustrations; how children connected the images and words to



construct a ‘dual’ narrative; how the images elicited an emotional response from the children; and how a combination of images and words supported an understanding of abstract and complex concepts (see Table 5.1).

### 5.3 Strand I: Picture Books and Children’s Spirituality

I now present the data for these four themes. I reflect and interpret Iris’ data hermeneutically under each theme.

#### 5.3.1 Use of Illustrations through Colour and Perspective to Support Understanding

All three children in the study appeared to value images very highly in their approach to reading and understanding the picture books. Often, pupils referred to the colour and how this affected the mood of the story or depicted the difference between good and bad actions. This may reflect the importance and passion the class teacher placed on the images during whole class teaching (Observation Extract 5.1). He made many statements that illustrations in the picture books were a way of exploring and getting under the skin of a text, and many opportunities were dedicated to careful questioning pertaining to the illustrations. The value placed on the images allowed children to become active participants in unfolding the complex meanings within the illustrations. Equipping children to read an image through explaining the use of salience, illustrates the complex synergy between the images and words which the class teacher sought to highlight.

| Running Time  | Observational Information  | Reflection and Interpretation  |
|---|--|--|
| 08:36   | The teacher shows the class the double page spread.<br>He discusses a technical term to appreciate art called ‘salience’ and explains to the children how the author uses size, colour and space to tell the story through pictures. He points to the use of white space and the colours and how the position of the characters can tell a story | The teacher is equipping children with art appreciation skills to grasp and uncover meaning from the illustrations through thinking how colour and size can affect the story.<br>Children excitedly delved into the pictures and were keen to discuss with partners. |
| Extract 5.1 – Classroom Observation <i>The Island</i> |  |  |

'If he didn't even say anything at all, it's kind of like judging a book by its cover, just because he didn't have clothes or maybe he was a bit different to them. By him being different, they [used this book, but they use him as, like, naked and short 0:07:31], and shorter or taller, but in real life it could be like if you're black or if you're a different race, then you could be treated different.

Extract 5.2 Group interview: Iris's Response to *The Island*



Image 5.1: *The Island*

### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Here, Iris showed a high degree of sophistication in exploring images and making quite complex reasoning from them. Her responses during the group interview suggest that she was actively participating in reading the images and words to support her understanding. Through her understanding of salience whilst discussing Image 5.1, that the story contains difficult themes and might appear gloomy and ominous. The only text is a line 'they took him in', yet Iris used the images to gauge a sense of injustice: the mob have clothes while the stranger is naked; the stranger is small and the mob imposing and large. She noticed that he is different and this prompted her personal sense that injustice is at play. Such perceptive understanding and comprehension of the use of colour in the image to ascertain personal meaning continued throughout the sessions. In the group interview too, Iris continued to grapple with complex symbolic imagery to explore how colours could represent good and bad, supporting her understanding of the central themes of the story that loneliness and unhappiness exist in society.

'It's, kind of, like, the kite on the other side. It's, kind of, like the parents could be bringing them together, because they're in the middle and the grandma's all the way on the far corner where it's a little bit more dark and the... It's, kind of, like the boy but it's the kite- If the parents were there then maybe it would bring them all a bit closer together'

Extract 5.3. Group interview: Iris's Response to *BLBHS*

In this, *The BLBHS* group interview Iris poignantly reflected on the use of colour in one of the illustrations (see Image 5.2 below). She drew upon her understanding of colour attached to emotion that the yellow light signifies life, the space where George's parents should have been. Iris is synthesising three artistic techniques to support her understanding in Extract 5.3. The first is salience: she has recognised that the author has depicted the yellow emptiness as a lonely space. The second is positioning: the author has positioned the grandmother at one corner with a vector (imaginary line) between the grandmother and a kite that presumably George plays with. Iris recognises the subtlety of the positioning as she explains the distance in space on the page is metaphorically the gulf in the relationship between the two characters. Thirdly, the framing of the illustration is internalised by Iris as being a negative and empty space. A bare page of concrete fills the image. This leads Iris to interpret the darkness as symbolic of George's feelings.

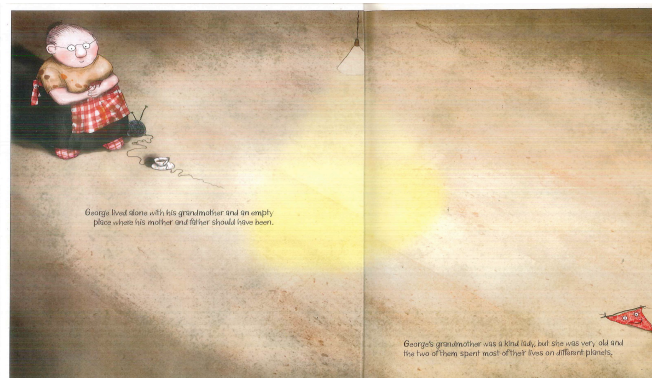


Image 5.2 *The BLBHS*

The extract in Extract 5.3 reflects a sensitive response to the idea of death and heaven; neither the words nor the picture overtly state that Georges' parents are dead, yet through colour, she has created her own sophisticated narrative process to understand this, reflecting the power of the illustrations to create meaning. The text uses colour to depict a space where the main character George's parents should have been with the assumption that they have died. Iris explores the meaning of this gap and fills it with her understanding that light may be associated with heaven or dying. She comprehends multi-faceted themes

through colour and the visuals to support her understanding of death and loneliness, matters which strike at the heart of the human condition and which are compatible with my definition of spirituality.

Iris notices the small detail of a kite and identifies this as an object that can unite children and parents. She observes that it acts a symbol of loneliness, that the kite is separate from the grandmother, and the main character George is missing from the entire illustration. Such an absence is significant on the part of the author and leads Iris to explore how lonely George must feel. The use of space in the double page spread highlights a gap in this character's life and such juxtaposition allows Iris to build an image and internal narrative that the story deals with separation.

They did. I think they're both equally as powerful, because I could still tell the story without the pictures, but the pictures just add to it, and you can find hidden emotions. Like Harry said, with the skull, and also on the other page it's, kind of, like all the darkness is, like, there's like a dark thing, there's a puddle there draining out onto, like, the light.

Extract 5.4 Group interview: Iris's Response to *The Harmonica*

Iris reflects on the illustrations and how they support her understanding. Although she recognises the importance words play in a story, she describes in the group interview (Extract 5.4) about the picture book, *The Harmonica*, that she feels the images reveal something greater than words can tell. In response to Image 5.3 (below) Iris explained how she made sense of a moral dilemma in the story where a boy feels compromised by a Nazi guard who beats him mercilessly yet enjoys the music of Shubert. Iris movingly talks about darkness linked to evil; she interprets the salience of the image where the boy bows in front of a menacing guard with two dogs and a whip. Previously unnoticed by me she talks about a skull faintly evident behind the guard.

Iris processes such depiction as evil linked to the clear blackness in the page. In fact, the image has no light at all, which compounds Iris's sense of bleakness, and she poetically describes the darkness as 'a puddle draining out the light'. Light is not mentioned in the text yet she subtly infers colours and emotions, fusing her horizons of understanding with those of the illustrator (Gadamer, 2013). Such a moving and poignant reflection of colour aiding and supporting understanding is a powerful recognition of the role that pictures can play in creating meaning.

| Running Time   | Observational Information  | Interpretation and Reflection   |
|--|--|---|
| 21:11  | Iris and Harry have their hands up excitedly to get the teacher's attention. They are looking at the picture book <i>The Harmonica</i> . The class teacher asks them to speak. Iris states that they have found a skull at the back of the Nazi Guard and the teacher praises them and says that he hadn't spotted that. The class all eagerly look and gasp in agreement. | This shows the multi-layered faculty of picture books and how Iris is looking deeply into the illustrations to find symbolic representations which she converts into meaning which supports her understanding of the text. She deepens her understanding about the Nazi guard to make meaning of his character. |
| Extract 5.5 Classroom Observation <i>The Harmonica</i> |  |   |

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Her comment, that pictures help you find hidden emotion, is interesting in that she feels images offer a story of their own, and she unpicks this meaning in the same way as reading the words. The pictures clearly support Iris to make sense of the character's emotions as she makes connections between the shades of light and darkness on the page (see Image 5.3 and 5.4 below). She uses the puddle of light on the floor which appears to get darker as it gets closer to the guard. The symbolism in the images is interpreted by Iris at many levels and supports her expressions of fundamental elements of the human condition.

'I think he's taking the music for granted. Almost like something so beautiful, he's making it mean, like, because he doesn't listen to it for enjoyment. He listens to it for, if he makes a mistake there's the whip or the dogs, but if he does good, he has, like... So, most of the page takes up the bad things, like the whip and the dogs, and this tiny circle takes up the good, which is the bread that he's going to give.'

Extract 5.6 Group Interview: Iris's Response to *The Harmonica*

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

Iris continues to display a sophisticated interpretive ability to use the hermeneutic impulse to know and understand the story and the situation within it (Sipe, 2008) when she is confronted with processing a dilemma between understanding human suffering. Iris continues to explore Images 5.3 and 5.4 in her group interview (Extract 5:6) and appears to group images into good and bad items. From the illustrations she captures the Jewish boy's predicament that the harmonica offers him hope and life in that if he plays it well, he will get the scraps of bread. The images appear to support Iris in making sense of the complexities of human actions. Her understanding of space in the book is enlightening as

she suggests that the beautiful music is overshadowed by the darkness of the situation and takes up most of the page.

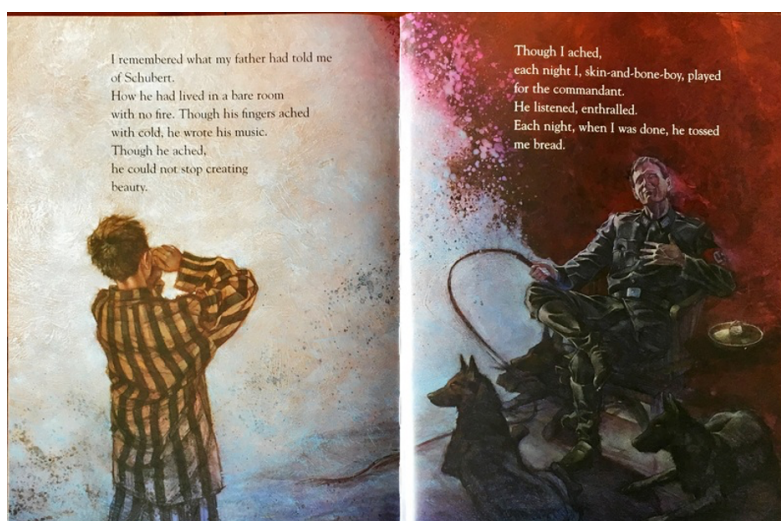


Image 5.3 *The Harmonica*



Image 5.4 *The Harmonica*

The framing of Image 5.3 with the boy on one side and the dark, crimson background on the other adds to the powerful juxtaposition between beauty and ugliness, characteristics of the human condition. Iris used the images to internalise her understanding of the horror of the situation and to question how music can be so beautiful yet be appreciated by a Nazi guard with a whip and fierce dogs. She appreciates the images and colours are used to confront issues of power, barbarity and war which reflect the essence of spiritual thought and expression and appears to have internalised the light and shade in this way.



This reinforces the response Iris made in class identifying the crimson colour as representing blood and death; the class teacher made an analogy of the guard having blood on his hands. Iris' understanding of illustration as a powerful means of comprehending is evident and she oscillates between words and pictures to create her narrative understanding. The synergy between text and illustration supports the view that the 'two sign systems are greater than the potential meanings offered by either written text or visual image in isolation' (Sipe, 1998, p.98). Colour and picture are used to stimulate emotion and feeling, leading to an understanding that fits Iris's own internal narrative of right and wrong behaviour. Her understanding of images leads to comprehending the behaviour of others as characteristically good or evil, and is an aspect of spirituality.

### 5.3.2 Connecting Images and Words to the Children's Own Understanding- Constructing a 'Dual' Narrative from a Combination of Word and Images

Detailed reading of the hermeneutic texts revealed how the children used picture books in a unique way, combining an understanding of words and text to enable them to construct the dual narrative. This is discussed below through reflecting on Iris's hermeneutic experience with the picture books.

It helped understand that, like, to kind of be thankful, because some people aren't born perfect or by looks or anything, but nowadays, if [once 0:16:12] someone who maybe was in a wheelchair or some sort of disability came to our school, we wouldn't do that [to him]. That kind of makes me proud almost, but to think that some people think of other people with disabilities at a lower level than them, that's just really rude. When the fisherman stands up for him, it realises that he has common sense and he's realising what's right and wrong.

Extract 5.7 Group interview: Iris's Response to *The Island*

Engagement with picture books offers a unique reading experience as children can read both the pictures and the text, oscillating between them. Iris demonstrates this in Extract 5.7 where she discusses the issue of prejudice that occurs in *The Island*. The fisherman attempts to stand up for the stranger but is over-ruled by the dissenting voices of the islanders. Iris interpreted the text and picture and this supported her to create a narrative which is illustrative of her developing worldview. She contextualises the situation and relates it to her school and the possibility of a prejudicial situation occurring if a disabled child arrived. Here Iris shows how she has understood the text and images to create her own narrative. This is reminiscent of weaving threads of meaning (Hyde, 2008), where

children draw upon stories to relate them to their own lives. Iris's strong impulse to internalise the words and pictures supports her to make sense of the story and, importantly, allows her to create her own individual story. Iris continues her dual understanding in her response to *The Harmonica*.

Here it says, I'm not sure what it means, it says, "Each night, like the very stars, my note had reached the other prisoners." So I think he's playing for joy, and he's like, he's hoping that someone can hear him, and hear his beauty instead of like, punishment. Instead of his orders.

Extract 5.8 Group interview: Iris's response to *The Harmonica*

Here, Iris attempts to understand a challenging phrase in *The Harmonica*. The Jewish child in the concentration camp talks movingly about how he hopes that his playing reaches other prisoners and is not for the sole pleasure of the Nazi guard. The text is allegorical and the picture shows the boy in his bunk while other prisoner's sleep. Iris shows how the synergistic relationship between text and picture supports her understanding. Initially she says she is not sure, but then explores a highly sensitive explanation. Relying on the two-sign system between image and word (Serafini, 2009), her understanding projects further than the text as she begins to contemplate the nature of beauty and evil and that the Jewish child is trapped between joy and hate. Meaning making from the picture books at this level supports Iris to offer a nuanced response and creates a powerful narrative understanding. Iris is confronted by other potent themes in the story as the character feels sad not to remember his parents, who have been killed by the Nazis.

It's kind of, like, their personality is more memorable than their face. Like, I forget, it was either the last one or the one before, about the people's souls, it's, like, reaching into the souls. So he really, like, dug down deep, and he just like skipped past all the emotions, and the face, and just jumped right into their love and care

Extract 5.9 Group interview: Iris's Response to *The Harmonica*

Iris draws upon the text and pictures to create her own understanding of the boy's dilemma. She navigates the emotions in the text to say that the parents' personalities may be more memorable than their faces and then draws upon the narratives in other books she has read, as she discusses the soul which appeared in *BLBHS*. This intertextuality allows her to weave the image and text to construct her own story, as she considers the boy is able to skim the surface of memories. She expresses heightened concern for the human condition and a sensitive level of spiritual awareness.



### 5.3.3 Affective Responses- How Images Affected an Emotional Response

All three picture books appeared to elicit an emotional response from the children in different ways. The themes were polysemic and they had to grapple with a myriad of different emotions vicariously. Iris's response in Extract 5:10 to the issue of whether the child in *The Harmonica* should feel guilty for playing to a Nazi guard is layered with emotion as she attempts to rationalise the boy's reaction, realising it is a matter of life and death. She sensitively understands the necessity for food yet weighs up the evidence that he should feel guilty. Iris takes the question seriously and has clearly entered into the world of the story and feels that he is playing for mercy. The text does not mention mercy, yet Iris uses this to express the sad and horrific situation the boy finds himself in. She appears to reflect a deep understanding of how life hangs on a thread for him and illustrates the tension of getting a note wrong which may have resulted in death. For a ten-year-old child to comprehend such events and then respond movingly with care and sensitivity demonstrates the potentiality of picture books.

Researcher: Why do you think he felt guilty?

Iris: Because he was playing and then he got, like, bread, and food, every time he played, but no-one else did, because they didn't have a harmonica like him, and they couldn't play.

Yes, as a bad thing. I don't think so, because he knows that if he didn't play he would have died, and because they would have killed him. Because it says in one of the pages that, like, one wrong note and he would be, like, dead, so he didn't play for joy. He played for, like, mercy, kind of.

Extract 5.10 Group Interview: Iris's Response to *The Harmonica*

Here, Iris considers such evil in her heightened emotional response to the Nazi guard. A superficial response might automatically lead her to state that naturally the book portrays him as evil; he whips and spits at the boy and makes him play the harmonica for his own amusement. Yet Iris in Extract 5:11 responds with a deeper and more nuanced stance which I argue reflects a high level of sensitivity and detached emotion. She states that nobody is entirely evil and seeks to understand and deconstruct the Nazi guard's character; this redemptive approach suggests deep engagement and internal processing of facts and experience. Iris seems objective in weighing up the character of the guard, looks for positive elements and offers recommendations about how the guard should have behaved.

Her revulsion for his behaviour is clear, yet she seeks to bring hope to the situation, hope that the guard would be kind.

I don't think anyone's completely evil, but I think that if he wanted to appreciate the boy, he shouldn't do it with a whip in his hand. He should maybe take the boy into a nice room, calming, like he certainly shouldn't still be in a Nazi uniform. Like, calm him down and, like, comfort him, and then just say, "Play." Like, not, "Play, Jew, play," it should be, like, "Whenever you're ready," because the boy's doing it for him. He's doing it for a sliver of bread, but he said, like, "Play, Jew, play," and he thinks he looks like he's really happy in the photo, but I think what would make him even more happy, if he was nicer to the boy. Because kindness, it's like giving a present feels nicer than receiving one.

Extract 5:11. Group interview: Iris's Response to *The Harmonica*

In *BLBHS* the palpable sense of loneliness of the little boy George is evident and Iris experienced this as she considers why the author does not let us see George's face until mid-way through the book. In Extract 5:12 she recognises that a lack of expression in his eyes and mouth is symbolic perhaps of unhappiness. She presses this point and considers how the character feels at various stages in the book. He moves from unhappiness and loneliness at the beginning to joy at the end with his new companion the dog. Iris is perceptive in reading the pictures and feeling the emotions of the characters. She doesn't mention the written text, yet the pictures are important to her response and understanding. Her intuitive ability to respond emotionally and subtly to the pictures may suggest the inherent power that images can have in stimulating an emotional and affective response.

He doesn't really have any expression on his face until you see his eyes and his mouth. Because his mouth, when you actually see it, it's either really hopeful or smiling, when you see his mouth. So I think the reason you didn't see it at the beginning was because it would have just been really bleak, but when he slowly shows, like, it's smiling [there 0:19:25].

Extract 5:12 Group Interview: Iris's Response to *BLBHS*

#### 5.3.4 Images and Words Supported an Understanding of Abstract and Complex Concepts

The rich descriptions produced from a phenomenological study of picture books highlighted a unique feature where the words and pictures often gave children an ability to ground and contextualise their understanding of often complex or abstract terms.

It is a happy place but it's not for [every 0:10:42] reason because no one really wanted them. I guess when you go to the, like, even in \_\_\_ with anything, the adoption centre, you see the dog or, like the child, but you don't know what they're like so it's, kind of, like, judging a book by its cover. So Jeremy's a really scruffy dog but, in the end, he turned out to be really loving. So just if you- I think you shouldn't be that judgmental if you don't like, like, the looks of it.

Extract 5.13 Group Interview Iris BLBHS

*The BLBHS* offers readers like Iris the opportunity to confront layers of prejudice associated with disability, albeit through the eyes of an animal. She begins by responding to the concept of the existence of heaven and views this as something happy, yet she feels strongly that the dog should not need to go to heaven as a result of his appearance and of nobody wanting him. The discussion in the group interview in Extract 5:13 sees Iris grappling with the concept of heaven and how the dog was saved, despite not being perfect. She makes an emotional statement drawing upon an analogy of judging a book by its cover. Vicariously identifying with the characters and situation, she is able to explain how a scruffy dog with only three legs isn't at first appealing, but despite this he fills an unhappy child with much love. She demonstrates how the picture books can support children in confronting challenging themes safely and how analogy helps. She continues her thought processes and contemplation of heaven below.

**Iris:** Just, like, when I think of it, I think of up, like, in the sky but it could be [inside of you 0:11:27].

**Researcher:** That's interesting. Can you explore that a little bit further? What do you mean by heaven being inside [them]?

**Iris:** Because they turn all their bad memories into good but all the bad memories inside of them, in, like, what they're feeling. So, if it's inside of them, they just turn all the bad stuff to good. Going all the way back to Harry how, like, it's real life because, like, if he slipped, it would be perfect in heaven, I think that this is heaven for him because, if he slipped, they wouldn't have realised that he needed another leg, so he never would have got, like, a [purple 0:27:14] \_\_\_ leg, a [dough] leg, he never would have got any of that. He would have just been, like, \_\_\_ it would be luxury, but he will never have the adventures of trying out all his new legs.

Extract 5.14 Group Interview Iris BLBHS

In this extract from the interview, Iris talks about dogs going through a green door to heaven after a certain time if they are not re-homed. This appears to anger her as she sees the injustice in this and I explored with her and the group what heaven is like. This surprised me as I hadn't thought that the group, and in particular Iris, might pick up on it as it is only a small mention at the beginning of the book. As they talked about it, I gently pressed her to further understand her reflection. Here in Extract 5:14 Iris continues to think about the

location of heaven, firstly thinking of heaven as being in the sky and that is part of us. I argue that her statement that heaven is inside us echoes the Christian idea of heaven as a state of consciousness achievable on earth, though Iris identified as having no particular familial religion.

The humorous nature of the tale at the moment when the characters try to make a fourth leg for the dog offers Iris a moment to contemplate what life in heaven must be like, if it indeed exists for her. She notes that the life that the dog is enjoying with his new family may be analogous to the experiences he may have had in heaven. Her comments suggest that memories in heaven should be good ones and perhaps there is a redemptive quality to her heaven, so that bad memories are turned into good ones. She may here also be discussing the good and evil dichotomy, and reflecting that heaven is a special and good place for her.

**Iris:** I kind of, feel- I always wondered if that if you, kind of, walked around and you had no faith, it was just, like, your soul walking around and you could meet them from that, it would, kind of, the real people who care are because you would still be friends. If some people would just be, like, "Oh, no," I would be, like, "No, I don't like your personality really, just because, when I saw you, you were nice, you looked nice." So if you were still friends with the same people that would, kind of, show who you are.  
If you couldn't see any of that, you could just see their soul, you could just read what they were inside, they were really, kind of, maybe weren't, like, didn't have the best sense of fashion or anything but you still shouldn't [Crosstalk 0:23:46].

Extract 5.15 Group Interview Iris *BLBHS*

Here, Iris continues her exploration of spiritually complex concepts as the group discuss the soul and she attempts to articulate her understanding of it. This would be difficult for an adult to explain, but Iris is keen to do so and anchors her understanding relationally to the character and her experience of friends. She attempts to relate the concept of the soul to a person's qualities and characteristics. Her multi-layered understanding goes further in saying if one could see into the soul it would allow us to ascertain people's true thoughts and personalities and if we liked them or not. This stems perhaps from her earlier indignation regarding how people are treated based on their appearance. Such sophisticated reasoning displays the power picture books can have on children and their spiritual development. I argue that the characters' situations and the fictional events in the picture books allowed a space for important spiritual reflection.

**Iris:** He didn't actually have a hole in his heart. It's just, like, because he didn't really have the emotions everyone else had, because he wasn't loved, so he didn't know what it was like to be really happy or anything. So that's, kind of, like, the hole in him.

Extract 5.16 Group Interview Iris *The BLBHS*

In this response, Iris attempts to contextualise the metaphorical understanding of George having a hole in his heart due to the death of his parents and his pervasive loneliness. Her level of perceptiveness is clear in that she understands the distinction between a physical hole and an emotional one, and understands this metaphor relates to George's mental suffering. Her understanding of the human condition needing love and care is clear. The lack of parental love strikes at the heart of Iris's response; she is able to conceptualise that a lack of love can have a profound effect upon a person. The pictures and words (see Image 5.5) here supported Iris in her understanding of an abstract phrase, which led her to a more in-depth and sensitive response to the character's feelings.



Image 5.5 *The BLBHS*

She encounters and confronts such complexity in human emotions and actions further in the reading of the picture book *The Island*.

It's very different to the one we read last week, because in the end... It's like because the last one had a happy ending, but this one, because at the end they threw... They actually killed the fisherman as well, who was the only one who wanted to help, and they threw the stranger off to sea.

Extract 5.17 Iris Group interview *The Island*

Here, Iris acknowledges the unsavoury side of the human condition when she seeks to understand the islanders' reaction to the stranger and their prejudicial attitudes. She

makes a contrast between the seemingly happy ending in the picture book *BLBHS* and the tragic consequences in *The Island*. In Extract 5:17 the children discuss Image 5:6. Iris wants to understand how an angry mob of islanders are so frightened by a stranger that they want to attack him. She considers the lone voice of a fisherman who tries to change the minds of the islanders and notices how the picture subtly depicts some islanders listening, but many who turn away. Her view that they killed the fisherman suggests intuitive anger in response to his treatment and that of the stranger.

The image and story support her to understand a polemic and unsettling aspect of the human condition. The visual images are powerful, they support the narrative here and help Iris to understand feelings which are alien to her personal experience. She is developing and adapting her personal narrative and negotiating her worldview (Erricker et al., 1997). The nature of killing because of an opinion or because of fear are powerful themes to understand and comprehend, yet in observation 5:18 she is keen to discuss the unfairness and injustice of the characters' actions and attempts to reconcile this. Iris's capacity to tackle such difficult concepts is supported by this powerful picture fiction text. Her ability to express her opinions in the group suggests she is actively working out her own narrative, creating for herself a virtual text (Iser, 1980) and that she is connecting her spirituality relationally to herself and to others (Hay and Nye, 1998).

| Timing                   | Observation   | Reflection and Interpretation  |
|--------------------------|---|--|
| 24:26                    | The class teacher is discussing the picture book <i>The Island</i> with the whole class and stops at the part where the islanders are eager to eject the stranger from the island. At the same time the lone and dissenting voice of the fisherman tries to persuade some people this is the wrong way to treat another human being. The children are looking at a picture with some islanders looking at the fisherman and others with pitch forks looking to the stranger. This is a moment of tension and animates the children. | I feel the children are using the image and the teacher's guidance to understand a complex dynamic in human relationships at a moment where the people of the island have an important decision to make about how they treat others. Iris is visibly moved and looking at the teacher; she seems to be trying to process how the islanders are treating the stranger. The class teacher sensitively asks children how this may relate to our society today. The teacher reads the words slowly and all are listening silently: 'people agreed with the fisherman but other voices were louder'. Iris seemed deep in thought and eager to talk with her partner. I noted this moment to pick up in the group interview. |
| Observation Extract 5.18 |   |  |



Image 5.6 *The Island*

#### 5.4. Summary

The first part of this chapter discussed how picture books themselves were used to engage children in spiritual thinking, the first strand of the study's second research question. Through reflection on Iris's experiences of the picture books I have outlined how these texts offered a space for spiritual reflection through their use of colour and perspective; visuals and language supported her understanding. From this, she constructs a dual narrative from a combination of words and images. These affected her emotional response and supported an understanding of abstract and complex concepts. I now discuss the findings of this first strand of the second research question.

## 5.5 Discussion of Findings for Strand I – the Use of Picture Books.

### 5.5.1 Picture Books and the Use of Colour and Perspective in Illustration to Support Meaning

The data revealed that the use of colour and perspective in the picture book illustrations supported children to make meaning. Iris exemplified this in Extract 5.2 where she considers Image 5.1 the page has only one short sentence and the double page spread looms imposingly with a mob of angry Islanders dressed in black and the naked white small body of the stranger. Iris understood the colour as representing emotions; the dark menacing colour of the islanders with their pitchforks contrasted with the small white hopeless figure of the stranger. The absence of many words on the page perhaps demanded more of her in relation to understanding colour and perspective. The perspective creates an impression of power: the islanders dominate the page and the stranger, depicted as helpless, occupies a small part of the page. The indeterminacy of the illustrator's pictures allow her to draw multiple interpretations and meanings, and this is in agreement with previous studies where images 'provided a means by which they could move from using talk as appreciation to using talk for critical understanding' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.71). Drawing on the images Iris was able to articulate a strong stance against the injustice she felt the stranger suffered and the pictorial counterpoint between the words and the pictures (Nikolajeva and Scott, 2006) perhaps triggered her imaginative engagement and stirred her empathetic response. Iris and her class partner also noticed a faint skeletal skull behind the Nazi guard, in Image 5.3 confirming Arizpe and Styles (2016) findings that children were able to appreciate the artists' techniques to convey emotion and relationships.

### 5.5.2 Connecting Images and Words to Children's Own Understanding – Constructing a Dual Narrative

Findings from this study support the literature which suggests that whilst children are engaged with reading picture books, they are able to connect both images and words to effectively construct a dual narrative (Arizpe and Styles, 2016). This was evident in Iris response to the picture book *The Island*. In Extract 5.7 she shows how through using both images and words she creates and constructs a narrative contextualised to her own life. This is reminiscent of Iser's (1980) notion of a virtual text, as she uses the example of a



classmate in a wheel chair to explain the discrimination in the story. Iris' response exemplifies the 'building blocks' used in constructing meaning from the indeterminacy created by the polysemic text (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p. 25). The dynamic interplay by a dual system of image and words supports her in creating an understanding which fits comfortably with her own worldview.

Iris was able to stitch together understandings in Extract 5.8 as she reflects the power word and image have when used together as the boy plays the harmonica for the guard but really, he is playing it for the other campmates and his missing parents. The picture allows Iris to shape her own narrative and supports her reflection on human cruelty and the beauty of music. This ties in with the view of a two-sign interplay between words and pictures where children integrate visual and verbal sign systems in picture books to make meaning. Intertextual connections allow children to connect stories to their lives and personalise stories 'having a lived through aesthetic experience of stories' (Sipe, 1999, p.124).

#### 5.5.3 Affected Responses: How Images Affected an Emotional Response

Many empirical studies into picture books confirm the power they have to elicit emotive and empathetic responses from children (Sipe, 1999; Arizpe et al., 2015; Arizpe and Styles, 2016; Evans, 2016). My research unveiled similar emotive responses and empathy was identified as an expression of spirituality (see chapter 4) which endorses the value of using picture books in the classroom. Extract 5.10 outlined a poignant moment in the research when Iris responding to *The Harmonica* attempts to reconcile how a human can behave so cruelly to an innocent child because of his religion. It seems that engaging with the picture book offered Iris a space to reflect on a concern for the human condition, a fundamental tenet of my definition of spirituality. My research reflects as Goodwin (2009) argues, that children are able to draw inferences from images and words to understand often complex interwoven plots and meanings. Iris is essentially 'living through the text' and not deriving a complete and finished story. She is 'participating in the story and identifying with the characters, sharing their conflicts and their feelings' (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 75). Through the images and word combination she 'moves beyond the literal allowing the picture book to play a central role in empathising with characters, inferring deep meanings from the information she gleaned from both written and the visual text' (Goodwin, 2009, p.154). Through this the meaning making process she constructs her own narrative.

One of the key propositions of this thesis is the dynamic interplay between the reader and the picture book text and that the reader 'fill gaps' left behind by the author (Iser, 1980) that contribute to their expressions of spirituality. In responding to the picture in *BLBHS* (Extract 5:13) Iris comments that the reader doesn't see the character's face, which to her is an indication of his sadness, the words in the text suggest he is lonely but not sad; through the use of the image and words she is able to respond sensitively and emotionally to the character's needs. She exhibits 'a dynamic system in which the affective and the intellect unite' (Arizpe and Styles, 2016, p.37). She internalises the images in the picture book *BLBHS* to discuss prejudice based on appearance and responds sensitively and with emotion to the characters' misfortune.

#### 5.5.4 Images and Words Supported an Understanding of Abstract and Complex Concepts

Findings from the data indicated that children often used the words and images to understand and explain abstract concepts. The books also aroused their interest in other abstract and metaphysical concepts such as heaven and the soul. Iris contemplates in Extract 5.15 what it would be like to actually see inside a person's soul to ascertain their qualities, rather than what she saw as a material focus on how a person looks and fits in. She states that 'If you couldn't see any of that, you could just see their soul, you could just read what they were inside, they were really, kind of, maybe weren't, like, didn't have the best sense of fashion or anything but you still shouldn't (Iris, Extract 5.15). Such a statement reflects how text and image have supported her in moving from abstraction into understanding in a practical way.

In many respects this has parallels with Sipe's (2008) three impulses which guide children's responses to picture books. These are identified as a hermeneutic desire to know; a personal impulse to connect the story to their own lives and an aesthetic impulse to make the story their own (Sipe, 2008). Iris initially was interested in understanding how the dog felt he might have gone to heaven as his new experiences were happy and fulfilling; she exhibited an impulse to know what this meant. Secondly, from this discussion of happiness, she linked it to her own understanding of heaven where she herself introduces the concept of a soul and weaves an understanding from the images and words in the picture book to

draw out her understanding of these abstract concepts. Finally, her impulse to make the story her own is reflected in how she is preoccupied by how people become friends and are judged by the clothes they wear and the latest phone they have. From the image of the green door and the text of heaven she has effectively conceptualised the soul and how this functions in her everyday life and how people perceive each other.

In sum, picture books can offer a space in which children can explore their spirituality. Many of the children's responses to the picture books highlight their previous untapped thoughts and spiritual nature as they reflect upon empathy and existential understanding. The thesis findings argue that picture books harbour the potential for children to engage with a range of themes as a result of the complex dynamic interaction between pictures and words. This heightens the process of children bringing their own experience to the text as a result of the increased level of indeterminacy in the picture books. Findings indicate that this prompts them to express and consider their spirituality in a safe classroom space. Chapter 4 examined how children reflected their spirituality through empathy and concern for the human condition, to make meaning and understanding and to muse existentially while using picture books. This discussion has outlined the features of the picture books that stimulated spiritual reflection in the classroom. I now move to strand II of the second question which looks at how the teacher used the features identified in the picture books to allow space for spiritual expression.

#### 5.6 Strand II: Teachers' Use of Picture Books

To examine strand two of my second research question, I read and re-read the classroom observation transcripts and my research journal entries. I highlighted and isolated frequently occurring significant statements and from these, themes began to emerge. Four themes developed from the class teacher, Mr Cordopatri's pedagogy. These were: how he adopted a personal growth model of teaching; his entry into aesthetic readings with the class; his valuing of children's aesthetic responses and his use of talk and language. The data are presented under each of these themes through hermeneutic reflection and interpretation on Mr Cordopatri's pedagogy.

### 5.6.1 Teacher Adopts a Personal Growth Model of Teaching

As has been discussed picture books themselves seem to offer a unique opportunity to support children to think about and express their spirituality. However, a second strand to this research question emerged as to how the teacher can exploit this potential. Interpretation of and reflection on the data highlights the teacher's commitment to a personal growth model of teaching. As discussed in chapter 2, such a view has a focus on the child and the experience they bring into the classroom, and privileges the role of literature and imagination, along with language. I now turn to discuss how Mr Cordopatri unconsciously reflected such an approach to pedagogy in the creative writing lessons which involved the reading and discussion of the three picture books.

From the observed lessons it was clear that literature played a pivotal role in the life of this classroom. The class teacher handled the picture books with ease and was comfortable to talk about the words and the images. In the following extract I observed how he used them to support all children's understanding. Here, to communicate the loneliness of the character, he repeated phrases and allowed the children to enter the text. His persistent focus on encouraging children to listen to the text and examine the pictures confirms his love of literature and he seemed to share this infectiously with his class. His use of the picture books and his situated pedagogy appeared to play a central role in how the children used their experience of picture book fiction to foster their expressions of spirituality.

| Time  | Observation  |
|---|--|
| 0:21  | Teacher says to the children at the beginning of the lesson, we are going to read this together and I want you to listen carefully to the words and look at the pictures.  |
| 03:21   | The class teacher pauses on the first page and asks children what do you think is really powerful about this page... And particularly the image  |
| 07:40   | Class teacher is reading <i>The BLBHS</i> and it is clear how much he enjoys sharing literature with the class. He uses a range of voice techniques such as whispering some phrases and adding emotion. Powerfully, he reads a sentence in the book with much emotion and says this is a sentence I really love.... it's really powerful 'George looked at the dog and the dog looked at George and they both knew that they were seeing a reflection of themselves'. The teacher seems to want children to appreciate the lives of the characters in the book and how lonely they are. The teacher reflects the power literature has and its importance to him as he says again how powerful the picture and words are. |
| 13:24   | He pauses on a page where the character George is running home quickly to ask if he can have the dog Jeremy and save him. The Class teacher pauses and almost in soliloquy effect asks the class: I wonder if you have ever felt such urgency to do something? He does not wait for an answer but the thought has lodged itself in the classroom consciousness.  |
| 20:59   | The book mentions the weekend, when lonely people realise just how lonely they are, and the teacher seems to want the children to bring their own experiences to the class as he asks them what they do at the weekends and why might weekends be lonely. This appears to draw the children further into the story.  |
| 23.25   | Children are asked to discuss the themes that have come up in the story... they have to discuss in pairs what their favourite phrases and what has affected them emotionally   |
| 26:04   | Class teacher moves around the classroom and pauses to have discussions with the groups of children. I notice he kneels down at child level and appears very interested in their answers, valuing children's own experiences whether relevant to the discussion or not.  |
| Extract 5.19 Classroom Observation of Lesson with picture book <i>BLBHS</i> |  |

Mr Cordopatri presented literature as important to the class; this is clear through repeated reinforcement of looking at clues in the text and pictures and his supportive stance in allowing children to get under the skin of the characters. The observations reflect his practice and the power of children's own experiences colour the classroom. Children appeared at ease sharing often fairly personal reflections on difficult human themes and emotions. He exemplified this through his question 'have you ever felt such urgency to do something?' Here he is valuing the personal growth of his class and allowing them to speak and write the text. The children were animated by George running home to ask permission to save the dog from being put to sleep because of his appearance and because nobody wanted him. Introducing the children's own aesthetic response to the lesson made the text become meaningful to them, as they imaginatively entered George's world and appeared

to be spurring him on, and at the same time reflecting on their own personal narratives and how this related to them. The class teacher valued the role imagination can play through his personal growth pedagogy in the way he used the picture books, not merely reading the book to children but actively involving them in it.

Inviting the children into the story is a powerful pedagogic tool and here the teacher weaves the children's potential experience of loneliness into the story and, I argue, allows them to feel the emotional depths of the character George. The children are required to contemplate why George may feel lonelier at the weekend; they are able to connect and identify with this and appreciate the situation he is in. Children's opinions in the observed lessons were valued and listened to, and opportunities were offered to discuss the themes one-to-one with the teacher and as a class.

Mr Cordopatri also often made powerful and personal comments about the book. He drew upon a strong level of intertextuality in the classroom which allowed children not only to focus on the picture book being studied, but also on other novels or texts they have read as a class. He praised Fatima for making links between the plight of the stranger and the class novel *'The Other Side of Truth'*. I ponder if here, he is demonstrating that 'the classroom atmosphere and the selection of reading materials are guided by the primary concern of creating a live circuit between the texts and the readers' (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 66).

Literature, and children's experience of it, was seen to be a powerful pedagogical tool in the hands of Mr Cordopatri and this was again reflected when he dealt with a challenging image (5.7) from *The Island* in Munch's expressionist style. Rather than asking the children on a superficial level what the image represented, he began to deconstruct it by asking them about body language and the expression of fear on the character's face. Children had the opportunity here to delve into the character and were aware their opinions and ideas were valued. This supported children to deal with the fairly disturbing image (5.7).



Image 5.7 *The Island*

Children were confronted with a cognitive conflict (Cottingham, 2005) as they faced the dilemma of dealing with cross cultural violence and tension towards the stranger. Mr Cordopatri moved them towards this vicarious conflict to make an assessment of the human condition; he effectively handed them the power to decide what was morally acceptable. He related the issues in the book to them by asking what they would do in this situation. Such intense scrutiny of human actions offered a rich opportunity for spiritual reflection; I posit that whether the teacher was aware of it or not, the picture books, combined with his pedagogy allowed personal experience to be privileged, creating a space where spirituality could flourish.

#### 5.6.2 Teacher Enters into Aesthetic Reading with the Class

A strong feature of a personal growth model of teaching is the aesthetic nature of pedagogy. Aesthetic reading brings the reader to the reading encounter and fosters the idea that meaning is negotiated between the text and reader (Rosenblatt, 1995). Hermeneutic observation of and reflection on the classroom environment below (Extract 5:20) presents a classroom where picture books are an important teaching tool used by the teacher, but not as a complete package with meaning established. Rather, they are used as a starting point for children to bring, explore and share their meanings as exemplified by the quote which opens this chapter, that the story remains only ink on a page until the reader breathes life into it (Rosenblatt, 1995).

| Time   | Observation  |
|--|--|
| 00:17  | The teacher says, before we read, I want to show you the front cover, and asks children to discuss what they think the book is about. He says that illustrations will play an important role here; what's in the image that might tell you about the themes and emotions in the story  |
| 09:19  | The teacher states that in this story, there are really good links in here to modern society   |
| 10:25  | The teacher -in sotto voce- what does the author want us to think of the fisherman?  |
| 11:26  | I wonder if that's the way you would take a stranger in and treat them?  |
| 13:14  | The teacher asks the children to look at Image 5.5 what do we see here.... What is her body language and what does it say about the fear of expression on her face?  |
| 21:11  | The teacher talks to Fatima about her intertextuality – linking this story with other books read by the class. She is keen to talk about the class novel 'The Other Side of Truth' by Beverly Naidoo, a novel that deals with issues of refugees and dictatorship. He talks to her at length, praising her perceptive connections and the importance of literature in the classroom. |
| 24:31  | The teacher discusses the reaction of the islanders to the stranger and asks the class what they would do in this situation.... How would they welcome such a stranger?  |
| Extract 5.20 Classroom Observation of Lesson with picture book <i>The Island</i> |  |

Here Mr Cordopatri reflected the contextual nature of learning when he played a Schubert piano concerto recording. They listened attentively, unaware that the music would link to the book, although they were perhaps contemplating the music and imagining what the story might be about. I argue that the teacher is inviting the children to share in this artistic and creative endeavour; the music offered potential for the children to prepare for interaction with the book. Mr Cordopatri was sensitive to the intricacies of the book and the reading process punctuated by building up anticipation, and leaving it on show for a week before reading it prompting children to look at the cover in anticipation.

Mr Cordopatri's approach and use of an arguably aesthetic pedagogy is also reflected in his personal responses to the pictures and text which he shared with the class. He explored the Jewish children feelings of fear at being torn away from their families and imprisoned in the camp. This forceful personal response from the teacher is a signal that children may recognise and resonate with, empowering them to respond aesthetically to the picture book also.



| Time   | Observation   |
|--|---|
| 0:09   | The class teacher plays Schubert's piano Sonata D Major, op. 53 to the class. An air of expectation is in the air as children are excited by the atmosphere and the picture book <i>The Harmonica</i> is set on the table. I later learn that the picture book is placed a week ahead of creative lessons to excite and enthuse the children. |
| 03:48  | Mr Cordopatri explains to the children that there are lots of illustrations and great vocabulary in the book. He explains that the illustrations are just as powerful as the text. I will come to each table to show you the images closely.  |
| 05:24  | The class teacher explains why he played the music at the beginning of the lesson and that it was Schubert which links to the story.  |
| 08:55  | The teacher says that 'When I read this, I thought the image and text was so powerful'  |
| 11:42  | The teacher discusses how the Jewish children must have felt in the camp... he states that it must have been terrifying...  |
| Extract 5.21 Classroom Observation Picture Book <i>The Harmonica</i> |   |

Discussing a different book, the *BLBHS* Mr Cordopatri lost himself in the story and I noted in the classroom observation below that he frequently paused to include the children in the reading event. At a moving and powerful moment in the picture book, not for the first time, the theme of love was explored. The text displayed a happy and contented child with his new friend, a dog, yet Mr Cordopatri opened up this part for child interpretation. He empowered the children here to become part of the story when he sensitively noted how it must feel to be unloved and suddenly find you are loved. He brings the story from the page and, I suggest, allows children to fuse their horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 2013) with that of the author, such that new meanings are generated from this fusion.

Through offering personal insights from his own life which the children clearly enjoyed listening to, Mr Cordopatri continued to support the class aesthetically. *The BLBHS* is an Australian picture book and towards the end the author made reference to the character George's new found happiness, saying he had a smile as wide as Australia. Mr Cordopatri added his own response here explaining why he liked this expression because he is half Australian. The teacher is effectively making the story his own, sharing this with the class, and inviting them to do the same. He is exemplifying how children are 'living through not simply knowing about' (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 63) the story and how they are fully involved in their own meaning and understanding of the story.

| Time   | Observation  |
|--|--|
| 10:43  | The Class teacher becomes immersed in the story – he asked the class to think about how it would feel to be unloved your whole life and then suddenly somebody pays attention to you?  |
| 22:30  | I note an interesting moment in the story. The Class teacher explains how the author of the picture book is Australian. This leads the teacher to state that his Dad is Australian and that he has an Australian passport... he refers to p.25 of the book which is a happy part of the story as George makes a new leg for the dog which results in humorous scenarios. The teacher says 'I love this description.... He has a smile as wide as Australia'. |
| Extract 5:22 Classroom observation related to <i>BLBHS</i> |  |

### 5.6.3 Teacher Values Personal Aesthetic Responses From Children

The classroom context reflected a culture where picture books and peer discussion were privileged. I observed and frequently commented in my reflective journal that children appeared at ease and that talking to generate meaning from these books was valued. Mr Cordopatri used the picture books to encourage and foster aesthetic personal responses to the illustrations, the words, and the picture book as a whole work of art. Reflection and observation suggested that knowledge and understanding in the class was viewed as fluid, dynamic and open for negotiation and the use of picture books supported this style of pedagogic intent to which I now turn.

| Running Time                                       | Observational Information   | Analysis   |
|--|---|--|
| 04:26  | Class teacher explores Image 5.8 <i>BLBHS</i> with the class and asks the children 'why might George be feeling lonelier at the weekend?' He does this with encouragement, softness, low voice and with a sense of emotion. | The teacher transmits a type of emotional intelligence in his response to the pictures, carefully reflecting that the meaning in the picture is open to interpretation.  |
| 04:52  | He talks to children about their own specific context of school and loneliness to support children's understanding. Many children respond to the experience of the character's loneliness at weekends.                      | The teacher contextualises the image into an experience they can relate to by introducing the idea of not attending school at the weekend, instantly allowing them to explore why a character might be lonely at weekends. |
| Observation Extract 5:23 Picture Book <i>BLBHS</i> |   |  |



Image 5.8 The *BLBHS*

#### Hermeneutic Reflection and Interpretation

In this extract Mr Cordopatri discussed the theme of loneliness in the text by showing children Image 5.8, asking them to identify with the character, and effectively inviting them to fill a space where their own experiences of loneliness might enter. He further contextualised this by asking children, 'if you are not at school at the weekend what might you miss?' Children were then forced to confront their own experiences of being away from school at the weekend and from this to imagine themselves vicariously in this character's situation. There is a clear connection between the text and the teacher inviting and valuing children's experiences which leads to meaning being interwoven and explored. In this section of the lesson, the teacher was using the picture book aesthetically and seeking an emotional response from the children. Such emotive responses which consider loneliness and its effects allow the children to explore meaning and also what it is to be human. He is creating an 'intellectual and emotional context' for the reader to connect to the symbols in the text to generate meaning (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 63). Such free expression in the classroom, I argue, can allow moments of spirituality to flourish.

| Running Time | Observational Information  |
|--------------|--|
| 15:28        | The Class teacher asks children to discuss the concept that 'George has a hole inside himself'. Children discuss quietly and animatedly in little groups. I notice the teacher talking with one group... I cannot hear the complete conversation but the teacher validates the discussion and children looking pleased continue. |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| 18:12   | The teacher addresses the class and says 'I wonder what we should be feeling about Jeremy now?'. He pauses for a few seconds and moves on. During this pause most children look pensively and think to themselves.   |
| 26:04   | The teacher asks children to think about the themes and issues in the story and if there is a moral. Children are invited to discuss in groups. They are also asked to discuss any HQV (High Quality Vocabulary) which has supported them with their understanding of the story. |
| Extract 5:24 Classroom Observation <i>The BLBHS</i> |  |

Valuing children's aesthetic responses to the picture books by Mr Cordopatri continued in all three observed classroom observations. I observed the teacher frequently drawing upon children's experience to augment, develop and empower their understanding of the story in the picture books. A particularly challenging section in the book *The BLBHS* involved the abstract concept of an empty space inside George, the main character. Sensing the sensitivity of the image and words as they hint that George's parents are no longer alive, Mr Cordopatri asked the children to discuss this empty space in pairs. He walked around the room, quietly acknowledging the often intimate and detailed conversations happening, and supporting this open culture in which experiences are shared and emotional meanings surface. He asked the class 'How should we be feeling towards Jeremy now?' and then paused, so that pupils could think quietly about this, injecting further opportunities for children to grow in their use of bringing themselves and their feelings to the book. Mr Cordopatri's pedagogy exemplifies the strong pupil-teacher relationship necessary in the classroom to allow such aesthetic development to develop. He satisfies what Rosenblatt describes as 'the atmosphere in the classroom, the relationship between teacher and pupil, and among the pupils, *must* permit a personal response to what is read' (2005, p. 64).

As the session progressed children were asked by Mr Cordopatri to think about themes the book raised and a potential moral for the story. Such introspection on the part of the children reflects the nature of picture books to get to the heart of often difficult and challenging concepts. Children were also prompted to reflect on the language and words which appeared in the story and which resonated emotionally with them and why. A poignant and frequent response from children was the phrase 'George stared at the dog and the dog stared at George and they both knew they were seeing a reflection of each other' (*The BLBHS*, 2008, p.2). Children were able to share intimate and personal accounts of why they thought George was lonely in pairs and with the class. The eagerness and tenderness of the responses were accepted and valued as meaningful by Mr Cordopatri.

This allowed me as an observer to witness an example of when normal education is transformed into ‘spiritual education as children grappled with the very marrow of meaning’ and feelings associated with the human condition (Wright, 2000, p. 11).

At the time of conducting the research many topical issues were in the press such as Brexit and the American President’s idea of constructing a wall to effectively stop immigrants entering the country. These issues were clearly at the forefront of the children’s minds and are reflected in the observation of the picture book, *The Island*. Appreciating children’s own reading of the text, Mr Cordopatri showed them a few images from the book and invited them to think about what the story could be about. This required reading complex images and internalising the effect that the writer and illustrator had in mind with their own internal personal narrative understanding.

| Running Time                               | Observational Information   |
|--|---|
| 19:08                                      | The teacher is discussing the picture book and states ‘There are lots of powerful themes in the story and how do you link to issues in wider society?’ ‘Is there anything we have looked at in Newsround that you can think about which may link with this story?’ Children discuss in groups and are keen and animated. Teacher kneels to discuss with a group, lots of nodding of heads and reassuring that ideas are valid and smiling. Children’s answers range from Trump to Brexit... the teacher answers ‘Ah, I wasn’t thinking of that... but ... yes...’ |
| 21:11                                      | Some children draw parallels between this picture book and their class novel ‘The other Side of Truth’ by Beverly Naidoo, which deals with issues of immigration, freedom and refugees. The teacher warmly endorses this connection made.   |
| 23:47                                      | A poignant part of the story is discussed where children consider the morality of decisions made by the islanders and the fisherman. The teacher talks about a clash between the words written and what the images depict. Teacher passionately retells the story, clearly moved by the book himself. Children consider the lone and distant voice of the fisherman and the islanders he deems as a ‘mob’. Children discuss the merits of both groups’ actions and the validity of each of these. Powerful discussions range from children.                       |
| Observation Extract 5:25 <i>The Island</i> |   |

During the story the teacher invited children to think about ideas or issues in society that may have a link here. Children chatted eagerly in groups about topical issues and the teacher reminded them about items they had heard about in watching ‘Newsround’, a children’s news channel. This book also led to a connection to the children’s wider reading such as their class novels which had similar themes related to refugees and immigration. The teacher encouraged a plurality of voices to help construct meaning from the book. Their voices were full of experience of other issues that they were worried about in the news, adding multi-faceted meanings to the text. I consider Mr Cordopatri’s pedagogy may

have captured ‘a spark of personal relevance for the children creating conditions to lead the young readers to further rich literary experiences’ (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 67). In discussions he often knelt down and discussed children’s ideas face-to-face, valuing them equally and reinforcing and supporting a safe intellectual space for creating meaning and enriching the experience of reading the text.

The quality and nature of Mr Cordopatri’s classroom discussion of the picture books also enhanced children’s ability to reflect upon the complexity of life’s difficult questions, thus empowering them to begin to reflect spirituality. Through his valuing of children’s aesthetic responses, their self-expression and ideas were able to develop and often there were links between the meanings derived from the picture books (as seen in the class observations) and in their articulated and confident responses later to questions (in the group interviews). Fatima echoed this internalisation from the teaching about the book and noted that it had affected her personally, stating, ‘I sometimes wonder how I ever actually got born here... how lucky I was...’ (Group Interview 2, *The Island*). Through his sensitivity to aesthetic teaching, he enabled Fatima in the process of ‘infusing meaning into the pattern of the printed symbol’ (Rosenblatt, 2005, p. 64). By fostering the articulation of ideas and the children’s ability to negotiate meaning from the words and images in the discussions, he helped the children reflect on and add to their internal worldviews.

| Running Time                                  | Observational Information   |
|---|---|
| 08:55   | Class teacher shows the class a sensitive image of a Nazi guard pointing to one side and children are to infer that this finger is a life or death decision. He reads the phrase related to kindling. Ask children to discuss what this means. He further contextualises this to relate directly to their experience of a residential camp where kindling is used for campfires. Do you remember? ... open questions used and children visibly think about the meaning of the character losing his family so quickly. Such matters get to the heart of a spiritual discussion as children in pairs consider this situation. |
| Observation Extract 5:26 <i>The Harmonica</i> |   |

Creating a space for the picture book to meet directly with children’s experience was a feature running through Mr Cordopatri pedagogy and I observed this often during observations. Such an occasion, where the teacher related the text directly to children’s everyday understanding, occurred in week 3 of the classroom observations where the class were reading and discussing the picture book *The Harmonica*.

A particularly reflective moment is presented as the teacher discusses a phrase in the story 'Like a length of kindling in one stroke, they split our family' (Johnston and Mazellan, 2004, p.15). The written text is juxtaposed against the sight of a Nazi guard brandishing a menacing finger signalling who lives and dies. My observational notes (see Extract 5.26) reflected how the class teacher showed the image (see Image 5.9) to the class in a double spread and moved the book slowly around the class as the children examined the shocking images. He then discussed the phrase above and asked the children to recall a residential visit they had all attended to Hindleap. In this moment, they recalled how they had physically handled the fragile kindling to make camp fires. Such fragility was perhaps internalised by the children, drawing upon their own experiences to consider the metaphor presented by the author signalling how quickly a family had been separated. The teacher constantly invited children's understandings and meanings to the reading encounter, developing an opportunity to safely experience a range of vicarious emotions and explore fundamental questions of life which are characteristic of aspects of spirituality.

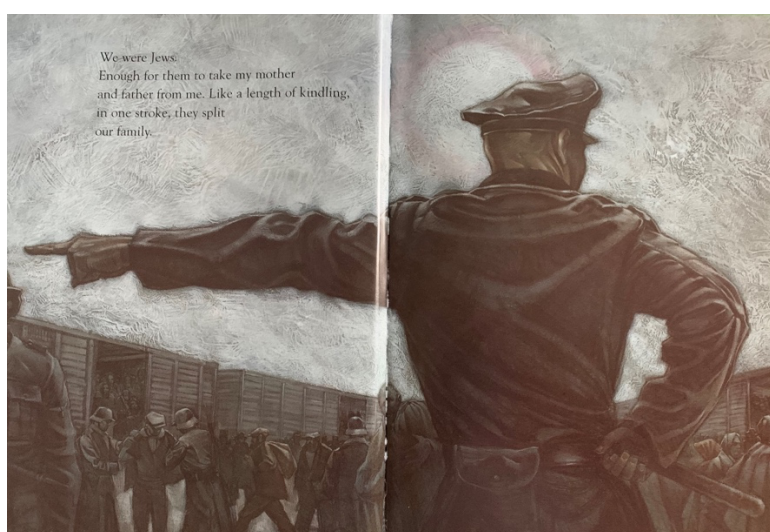


Image 5.9 *The Harmonica*

Drawing on the observational data, I have outlined my hermeneutic reflections on how the teacher used picture books to value and support children's personal aesthetic responses. Such aesthetic reading on part of the teacher and the children's responses allowed the young people to create their own virtual texts (Iser, 1980), through which their understanding and experiences were enlarged on what Jauss refers to as 'a horizontal continuum of understanding' (1982, p. 23). Their own aesthetic experiential responses allowed them to come closer to the text and create meanings which are spiritual in nature.



I now discuss the final theme of the data: the teacher's use of language to mediate symbolic thought and narrative in the books.

#### 5.6.4 Teacher Uses Language and Talk as Symbolic Mediation

Reflection upon and re-reading of the hermeneutic texts began to reveal the importance of talk involved in this phenomenological study of children's spirituality. In this section I look specifically at how the teacher's use of talk related to the picture books can influence opportunities for expressions of spirituality.

| Time  | Observation  |
|---|--|
| 03:22   | Children are asked to discuss the pictures and text so far and discuss in pairs<br>The teacher welcomes and values responses from the children and it feels like a dialogic classroom where talk and language are used to support learning and meaning.  |
| 03:46   | What kind of image do we get from these words and pictures? -Children look busily at image and words and discuss in pairs.   |
| 08:27   | Teacher discusses with Harry why an image depicting George as lonely is so powerful  |
| 12:05<br>and<br>12:56                           | The class teacher shows children a page where George is talking to the lady who runs the dog's shelter- the picture has some subtleties such as images of dogs on her earrings and paw marks around the image. The teacher asks them to look beyond the superficial.... he explains what this means and children begin to investigate. |
| 26:04   | Teacher discusses children's ideas as the class listen. I notice he values all responses and children feel comfortable with the strong dialogic action   |
| Extract 5:27 Classroom Observation <i>BLBHS</i> |  |

My classroom observations reflected an environment where pupil talk and dialogic interaction were an important part of learning and the teacher's pedagogic style. Mr Cordopatri appeared to view the children as co-constituents in the learning process, as their responses were guided, yet valued and explored further. In the extract above (5.27), he asked children to discuss words and images in the text, encouraging them to bring their own ideas and explanations. I reflect on Harry's engagement with the teacher and how he thoughtfully speaks with him about the theme of loneliness. Allowing children to create meaning together through talking and discussing complex themes and emotions was evident when he drew children's attention to the finer details in the images. The dog shelter lady has earrings which depict dogs and there are paw prints around the images, yet she dissuades George from selecting the dog with three legs (See Image 5.10 below).



The children are encouraged to wonder how a person that seems to care for dogs can be prejudiced against him having three legs and being dirty! Such attention to detail allows the children to think for themselves, and reveals the use of language as a tool for communicating these ideas.



Image 5.10 The *BLBHS*

| Timing  | Observation   |
|---|---|
| 14:03   | In the story the teacher pauses after reading 'the Nazi guard wore ugliness and death upon his shoulders like epaulets'. Children appear to struggle with this comparison and he gently encourages by engaging children to talk about the guard and what is on his shoulders. A discussion about the Nazis continues. This discussion allows children to articulate their thoughts and they appear to be constructing their ideas allowed. Through an understanding of this the children are able to consider the position of the Jewish child who feels guilty playing the harmonica and receiving scraps of bread whilst his friends die. The children consider why the boy states 'he despised himself for every note he played'. Such a complex emotion has been supported through this class discussion. |
| 18:13   | The teacher again allows for much discussion around the seemingly challenging emotions at play in this picture book. He stops his reading and pauses as the child in the book makes a comparison between what his father told him about Schubert, that he ached with the cold in a bare room yet still continued to produce beauty through his music. Mr Cordopatri says to the children to think carefully about this comparison and the children discuss in pairs and meaning for them unfolds as to what this statement means.   |
| Extract 5.28 Classroom Observation <i>The Harmonica</i> |   |

Here, the teacher is attempting to use language to explore some difficult concepts in the picture books. The children were attempting to understand 'the Nazi guard wore ugliness and death upon his shoulders like epaulets.' Through supporting children to talk and discuss their ideas, gradually, the class were able to deconstruct the words and offer ideas regarding what this could mean. The children were able to think aloud and, as they did so, classmates and the teacher used language to support their thinking; they were able to arrive at an understanding that required them to contemplate the behaviour of the Nazi

guard. The teacher might have told them his meaning of this, but through supporting them to discuss in pairs and later as a class, a joint construction of knowledge (Mercer, 2000) was allowed to develop. He used language in his teaching of the picture book to oscillate along the efferent and aesthetic continuum, allowing children to understand factual issues of the War and then aesthetically, through use of language, to understand how the characters felt (Rosenblatt, 2005). The complexities of the character's situation in *The Harmonica* were highlighted by the teacher when he asked children to consider the statement 'he despised himself for every note he played'. At this point children were invited to see beyond the horrors of the war and the concentration camp to understand how the beauty of music might lead him to feel guilt. Such complex understanding is developed through dialogue and children are able to process this to develop their understanding through the teacher supporting their talk and interaction with others.

Mr Cordopatri actively engaged children to use language to think about the hardships the composer Schubert faced and those of the Jewish child. Such intense introspection is supported through dialogue from the teacher to the class and in pairs. Allowing children dialogic opportunities appeared to strengthen the understanding of the sections of the texts discussed and helped the children in my study formulate complex opinions about the human condition. His use of language, through questions and his reading and discussion of the words and phrases in the picture books arguably facilitate what Rosenblatt advances happens during the aesthetic reading transaction 'we listen to the sound of the words in the inner ear; we lend our senses and emotions, our sense of being alive to the new experience' (2005, p. 75). Through privileging language as a pedagogical approach, he is effectively leading the children into new understandings.

I argue that the partner talk and the dialogic dynamic interaction used by the teacher in these lessons, is characteristic of how language supports children's understanding of the abstract (Vygotsky, 1986). Ostensibly, the teacher is fostering language as a tool for thinking, which has important ramifications for expressions of spirituality. Such reflexivity of language in the classroom can allow pupils to gain meaning and understanding from picture books which in turn can be supportive of spaces for spiritual expressions.

## 5.7 Discussion of Findings: Strand II of the Research Question: Teacher Pedagogy

In this section I discuss the findings related to strand II of my second research question; how the teacher's use of picture books support children's expressions of spirituality while in the classroom?

The findings from the data analysis into how the teacher used the picture books to foster expressions of children's spirituality are presented in Table 5.1. The characteristics identified from the teacher's pedagogy begin with a personal growth model of teaching. From this model, he appreciated and actively exploited moments for aesthetic teaching of reading the picture books; which allowed him to draw the children and their experiences into the reading event. This led to classroom discussions of the books which I suggest allowed for moments of deep thinking and space for the spiritual dialogue to emerge. I now discuss each of the four areas and link the findings to the literature.

### 5.7.1 Teacher Adopts a Personal Growth Model of Teaching

As discussed in chapter 2, a personal growth model of teaching is one which endorses the value of literature and children's own experiences in learning. Literature is a powerful vessel through which ideological ideas can be pursued and many teachers (consciously or not) appear to have sympathies with this model (Boustead, 2000). The data indicate that Mr Cordopatri, had a strong association with it. Literature, and indeed picture books in particular were strong features of his practice and Extract 5.19 indicates that he shared his love and passion for literature with the children and the extent to which he included them in the stories. Children in the class appeared to be at ease being at the centre of the reading event, they were keen to share their views and weave them into the text. This is reminiscent of Scott's understanding that 'personal narratives act as a point of entry into interpreting spiritual experiences when a space for such interpretation is engendered' (2001, p. 120).

The depth and level of Mr Cordopatri's engagement with the picture books allowed children to move relatively seamlessly from superficial responses to moments of profound joy and excitement, reminiscent of a sense of awe and wonder at the characters and their

various situations. This was reflected in Extract 5.20 when the teacher supported Fatima's development in understanding issues of racism. Valuing her own experience and what her life had brought to the text allowed for a profound and evocative response. I argue that Mr Cordopatri's personal growth model of teaching encompasses these elements and acts as a catalyst for picture books to come alive to the sound and expressions of spirituality. As Extract 5.20 reflects Fatima's responses are the result of searching discussions with the teacher and fellow classmates and that such a fluid and collaborative space to think and draw on personal experiences can provide fruitful moments for picture books to act as a stimulus to spiritual expressions.

#### 5.7.2 Teacher Enters Into Aesthetic Reading with the Class

Whilst I have explored the potential picture books have to support children's spirituality, for Pike, 'spiritual development does not occur directly from the study of a text but rather *how* the text is studied' (2000, p.180). The 'how' in the case of Mr Cordopatri is the result of a pedagogy informed by reader response theory (Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995) which 'focuses on the growth of the whole reader and not simply on the text' (Pike, 2000, p.181). The data suggest that Mr Cordopatri often enters into an 'aesthetic reading' (Rosenblatt, 1995) of the picture books with his class when he acknowledges that the children bring with them numerous past memories and life experiences. As Rosenblatt argues 'They must have experienced some need, emotion through which they can construct the new events and emotions in the text' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.78). In Extract 5.19 Mr Cordopatri acknowledges a sensitive part in the *BLBHS* and asks children to discuss in pairs the themes in the story, then he walks silently around the room listening and supporting pairs of children. I argue that this led to children bringing themselves to the reading encounter as a result of Mr Cordopatri's perhaps implicit understanding of the nature of aesthetic reading. He is arguably developing a community of inquiry and his pivotal role as teacher is 'facilitating such a community by establishing parameters of patience, respect and tolerance of the views of others' (Cottingham, 2005, p.49).

#### 5.7.3 Teacher Values Personal Aesthetic Responses from the Children

Mr Cordopatri valued children's own experiences and their contribution to lessons played a fundamental part in developing an authentic understanding of the picture books. In

Extract 5.23 he talks to the children about the characters' loneliness in the picture book *BLBHS* and he values and encourages children's ideas about this in a school context. He in effect invites children to be part of the reading transaction, enabling 'the reader and text [to] act upon each other' (Rosenblatt, 1995, p.30).

A strong example of Mr Cordopatri valuing children's own individual experiences came in Observation Extract 5.26, where he talks to the class about a poignant moment in the picture book *The Harmonica* where the children consider an image of a Nazi guard who pointing a finger to the left and right. We learn that one side signals death and the other life. He asked the children to consider the phrase 'like a length of kindling in one stroke, they split our family'. The teacher contextualises understanding by exploring what kindling meant and spoke to them about campfires they had all been part of on a residential visit. This immediately engaged the children and their memories of this supported their responses. Pike argues that children's aesthetic response to a work of literature is viewed as important as the text itself, and spiritual growth occurs where pupils acquire insights into their personal existence' (Pike, 2000). Arguably this was evident here as the children made text to life and life to text connections and voiced new understandings as a consequence. This demonstrates a 'responsive pedagogy' (Pike 2002), where the teacher supports children to interrogate the work, asking questions and where children bring their own memories and experiences, values and aspirations to the reading experience.

#### 5.7.4 Teacher Uses Language and Talk as Symbolic Mediation

The data revealed that the teacher's talk supported the children's engagement and mediation of complex themes in the picture books. Talking and discussion were features of the classroom in all the observed lessons. Children were frequently asked to discuss ideas and responses in pairs, time was offered to orally rehearse ideas and work at generating meaning collaboratively. Questioning and opportunities to generate meaning supported the children in better understanding the picture books and organising their thoughts (Vygotsky, 1986). The children were also supported to notice nuanced styles in images and words. In Extract 5.27 for instance when Mr Cordopatri discusses the picture book *BLBHS* and asked children what they felt about the images and words in the text. His pedagogic style of subtle questions and reflecting supports children's 'lived-through' experience of the text and their understanding advocated by Rosenblatt. She argues that 'teacher's

questions too often hurry the students away from the lived-experience, and that after the reading the experience should be recaptured and reflected upon' (2005, p. 94).

Opportunities for children to discuss new vocabulary or offer insights into meanings in the picture books were also frequently observed in the classroom. One example is in Extract 5.28 where the Class teacher asks the children to think about how the Nazi guard wore death and ugliness 'on his shoulders like epaulets'. This proved challenging for the children and their joint construction of knowledge with their peers was visible as they thought aloud. Dialogic interaction is important in creating meaning: 'truth is not born nor found inside the head of an individual person. It is born between people collectively searching for truth in the process of their dialogic interaction' (Bakhtin, 1984, p.110). Adopting this argument places importance on how the teacher effectively mediates language and the stories in the picture books allowing children a space for dialogue. The value of dialogic space to respond to visual texts was highlighted by Evans (2016) whose research showed how thought-provoking picture books can 'stimulating rich discussions and releasing previously untapped thoughts and emotions allowing the reader to reflect upon life' (Evans, 2016, p.64).

## 5.8 Summary of Chapter 5

This chapter has outlined my findings in relation to my second research question which is split into two strands. I presented my findings for Strand I relating to how picture books themselves support children in their expression of spirituality. Picture books were supportive through:

- Use of **Colour and Perspective** in Illustrations
- A **Dual Narrative** (words and pictures)
- **Affective Responses**
- Images and Words Supporting and Understanding of **Abstract Concepts**

Having established the features in picture books which supported children in expressing their spirituality; Strand II of this second research question sought to identify how the teacher's use of these picture books offered children opportunities to express the

spirituality already identified in chapter 4. Findings from the study reveal that the teacher's pedagogy in his use of picture books were supportive through:

- Teacher Adopts a **Personal Growth Model of Teaching**
- Teacher Enters into an **Aesthetic Reading** with the class
- Teacher Values **Personal Aesthetic Responses** from children
- Teacher uses **Language and Talk** as Symbolic Mediation

I now turn to chapter 6 to discuss my conclusions and recommendations.

‘What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.’

T.S. Eliot (1974, p.208)

### 6.1 Introduction

The main aim of this study was to investigate whether picture books could offer a space through which primary school children’s spiritual expressions could emerge. The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) makes tentative links between fostering children’s spirituality and literature, yet makes no mention of picture books or other genres of literature. This, alongside the requirement for Ofsted (2019) to regulate schools’ legal duty to promote children’s spirituality exposed a tension between these policies and how practitioners interpret this practically in the classroom. A review of the literature highlighted a gap in the field regarding the relationship between reading picture books and children’s spirituality. Out of this my principal research question developed; How do 10-11-year olds express their spirituality while engaged with picture books in the primary classroom? The paucity of research specifically relating to pedagogy and picture books prompted a subsidiary research question; How do picture books and the class teacher’s use of them support children’s expression of spirituality?

My intention in completing this professional doctorate was to contribute to knowledge and in particular to support practitioners in recognising spirituality and how to nurture it. I hoped to add to and deepen how literature, in the form of picture books, might alleviate some of the tensions between policy and classroom practice in nurturing children’s spirituality.

### 6.2 Responding to the Research Questions: Main Findings of the Research

#### 6.2.1 How Do Children Aged 10- and 11-Years Old Express their Spirituality while Engaged with Picture Books in the Primary Classroom?



This doctoral study was driven by a strong understanding about the relationship between literature and spirituality. My definition of spirituality encompassed a concern for the ultimate meaning of life.

*Spirituality is concern for the ultimate meaning of life and of the human condition. It is inbuilt in humans and it forever seeks articulation and expression through the senses and mind. It can be transcendental and expressed relationally and/or through the Divine.*

The thesis has demonstrated that stories and images in picture books offer a starting point for creating opportunities to engage children's opinions and understandings. I argued that spirituality is fluid, dynamic and inbuilt in humans and seeks articulation in everyday life. A new insight provided by my work is that story can be a catalyst to unveil and connect with an inner spirituality that children were enabled to bring to the reading of the three picture books. I have discussed how many other empirical studies have often used story unwittingly as a way of initiating discussions of spirituality. As a consequence, in this thesis I sought to prioritise and explore its deliberate potential as a conduit to allow children to bring their innate spirituality into the open. Children in the study used the stories in the picture books as a starting point to draw out rich and authentic spiritual reflections.

My findings reflect the relational nature of children's expressions whereby their spirituality was related to themselves and others. My definition of spirituality encompassed concern for the human condition and that this could be expressed through the senses. The children in my study reflected a deep sensitivity as they made emotional connections to the fictional characters in the picture books. This led to a conceptualisation that children expressed their spirituality through **empathy and concern for the human condition**. Powerful examples were discussed of children reflecting empathetically upon a wide range of issues that affected the characters in the stories and confirmed that caring about the plight of others, animals, humans and the world, featured strongly in their expressions of spirituality.

Although picture book studies have revealed their potential as a way of fostering empathy (Arizpe et al. 2015), my study has added an additional layer highlighting that such empathy is reflective of spiritual expression. A concern for the human condition also featured in

children's responses for all three picture books in different ways. The study offered multiple examples of children entering vicariously into the lives of the fictional characters and responding deeply and empathetically to their plights, almost as if they were discussing real people. The children's understanding of the needs and worries of the characters acted as an entry point for them to relate to analogous issues which worried them and their friends. The data offered potent examples of how picture books can offer a space to think, reflect and listen. Children in the study were often confronted with complex and demanding ideas and were open and ready to offer their views. This suggests that the children had a sensitive spiritual nature which needs to be both nurtured and attended to in a classroom setting. It reflects too, subtle ways in which spirituality manifests itself and how it is mediated through both the senses and the mind.

As such, another important finding from the study was that children's **spirituality encompassed meaning making, ordering experience and adopting a worldview**. The picture books presented the children with a range of human scenarios and invited them to both understand and make sense of these. It was clear that the three children already possessed strong views of matters of society and the wider world, and were knowledgeable about world events and had opinions on these. The picture book narratives which included words and images reinforced the argument that narrative is an instrument of thought (Bruner, 1986; Hardy, 1988). In line with reader response theory (e.g. Iser, 1980; Rosenblatt, 1995) children often connected the story from the picture book to wider matters and others' life experiences, and in the process, made the book's narrative their own. This allowed them to make sense, adopt positions or unveil new meanings on a range of issues which went to the heart of what it means to be human.

Findings also indicate how children used other types of stories and literature to augment and broaden their meaning making abilities. Imagination and metaphor were key features in supporting children's meaning making and ordering of experience. They were keen to enter the fictional world of the picture book narratives and used metaphor and imagination related the themes and character's experiences to their own and others' lives. Such features are worthy of exploration by educationalists as a way of supporting children to reflect on their spiritual experiences.

The study also revealed children's capacity for **existential musing** as a way of expressing spirituality. Children presented an interest in discussing complex abstract spiritual ideas that were not explicitly present in the books, yet captured their imagination. My conceptualisation of spirituality indicated that spiritual expression can be relationally or transcendently expressed and/or through the Divine. Findings from the thesis acknowledge that children were curious about life and far from eschewing talking about death, heaven and the soul, they actively engaged in such discussions. The picture books offered children an opportunity to discuss what might perhaps otherwise have been uncomfortable or awkward spiritual conversations. This highlights the importance of a safe school classroom context to discuss spiritual issues. The stories in the books supported children in grounding the abstract in real life and the language used was often exploratory and tentative. The books again acted as a conduit to addressing issues of metaphysical importance to them which they related to themselves or others to support their sometimes binary understandings of good and bad behaviour and the complex notions of a soul. Findings confirm that children need a space to articulate and explore the bigger questions of life and that the picture books acted as a stimulus to help them express their relational understanding.

#### 6.2.2. How Do Picture Books and the Class Teacher's Use of them Support Children's Expressions of Spirituality?

Having discussed how children expressed their spirituality using picture books in the classroom I now address and critique the main findings and respond to the second of my research questions, which is divided into two strands. Firstly, I begin with how the picture books themselves supported children's spirituality. In chapter 5 I outlined the four themes identified in the thesis which reflect (Strand 1) how picture books supported children in expressing their spirituality.

The research has gone some way to showing that picture books as a specific literary genre have an important part to play in stimulating and initiating spiritual discussion. Their unique status with words and images perhaps invites the reader more easily into the story. As a form of children's literature, I argue that they can offer a more liberal, social justice angle to children's understanding, as the images can support all children in the creative story-

making process regardless of reading ability. Images in the picture books appeared to support children's understanding of the story and the analysis reflected their enjoyment and curiosity in discussing them. **Colour and perspective** allowed children to weave together meanings and understandings which can be considered spiritual in nature. For example, subtle nuances in the style and depictions in the image were noticed, including the interpretation of colours having positive or negative connotations and the positioning or the size of characters. Images gave the children a greater control and freedom over the story and allowed them to interpret and recall memories in their own lives, effectively using them to create new narratives of connection.

The poignant images along with the text in many of the picture books offered pupils contemplative moments to reflect on what they thought and to link it to their own situations and lives. The children skilfully oscillated between the words and images to gain understanding from a **dual narrative**. Sometimes the pictures and the words in the story held different meanings to the different children, yet the synthesis of the two sign systems often generated a strong understanding. Picture books held many meaning making opportunities to support and challenge their thinking and perhaps allowed a higher level of indeterminacy than a purely word orientated text could offer.

Findings suggest that the images in the picture books affected children's emotions, they often voiced **affective responses** to a range of situations. The picture books allowed children to feel a myriad of emotions ranging from sadness and revulsion to fear and humour when entering into the lives of the characters. Children were moved from the literal to use their imagination and weave meaning and understanding suggesting the power picture books have as a genre of children's literature in the primary classroom.

Picture books offered children the freedom to move between images and words which in turn equipped them with opportunities to construct understandings and meanings of often **abstract and complex concepts**. This is particularly significant when considering the spiritual concepts discussed such as heaven and the human soul. The reading of the book both in terms of text and pictures often felt like an occasion, a special moment where the intellect and emotion could meet and allow previously unspoken spiritual thoughts and reflections to emerge.

I now turn to discuss Strand II findings which focus on how the teacher's use of the features in the picture books and his pedagogic style supported children's spirituality.

The class teacher's pedagogy in using the picture books and creating spaces for spiritual expression now adds the final piece to the research jigsaw. An important finding in my study was the privileging by the teacher of a **personal growth model of teaching**. Findings show that he placed a high importance on the power of literature and displayed a high level of understanding that texts, far from being closed and finished products in terms of meaning, were alive and open to new understandings. Such a philosophic approach to pedagogy which encompassed an understanding of children's lives and experiences, allowed a space for what I argue were spiritual discussions to both emerge and develop.

The power of literature in the classroom as a way of communicating important messages is reflected in the findings as the children were keen to understand the class teacher's thoughts and interpretations of the books, as well as their classmates'. In this way my thesis also highlights how a teacher adopting a reader response approach (Rosenblatt, 1995) promotes and encourages an **aesthetic reading**, allowing children's own experiences and lives into the text and creating space for children to think and reflect. Such introspection was a conduit for spiritual expression. Fostering a pedagogic approach sensitive to reader response theory, allowed children to enter into a transaction between the meaning and themes in the picture books effectively making the story their own. I argue this has ramifications for pedagogy and children's spiritual expression in primary classrooms.

A related finding highlighted the significance of the teacher's practice of listening carefully, responding to ideas and **valuing the children's contributions**. This allowed them to bring themselves to the story and use narrative to make sense of the world. Rather than explaining any misunderstandings, the teacher often contextualised the meanings relating them to the children's orbit of understanding and life experiences.

My final point relating to the findings of teacher pedagogy and how this influences the use of picture books to foster children's spiritual expressions is the **use of language and talk** to mediate some of the complexities in the picture books. The dialogic interaction between

teacher and pupils was a strong indicator of how spiritual expression emerged. The children actively entered the narratives of the picture books and through discussion between the teacher and each other were able to develop their meanings and understanding. A fluid dialogic space where the teacher and pupils tussled with understandings allowed for opportunities for spiritual expression to develop co-constructively in the classroom.

### 6.3 Contribution to Knowledge

Having discussed the main findings of the research in response to my two research questions I now discuss my contribution knowledge. I acknowledge the limitations of my small-scale doctoral study, but argue this work has made a contribution to the field of children's literature and spirituality.

Firstly, the literature review in chapter 2 clearly identified a gap in the literature in the relationship between picture books and primary school children's expression of spirituality. With only one similar study (Kendall, 1999) written some time ago, I argue my study suggests that picture books can foster children's spirituality beyond the meaning making identified by Kendall (1999). My study also revealed that children express their spirituality through empathy and existential musing. Building on the relational theoretical framework of Hay and Nye, (1998), and through the use of a hermeneutic phenomenological approach I have been able to capture and further understand children's expressions of spirituality in response to picture books in a nuanced manner.

My study demonstrates that picture books have the potential to create spaces in the classroom where spiritual discussions and expressions can flow. Where this study deviates from others (e.g. Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008; Posey, 2013) is that children's expressions of spirituality were stimulated by the vicarious experiences of fictional characters in picture books and their response to issues in three particular texts. The picture books appeared to create a space or a platform from which the children could contextualise their spiritual expressions, and these went further than weaving threads of meaning (Hyde, 2008) from various sources. Other research studies into children's spirituality (e.g. Erricker et al., 1997) have shown that children use information from stories, television and film to contextualise

and articulate the meaning of the spirituality, but the use of picture books is a new contribution.

Children's spiritual expressions captured in my research subscribe to research in the field that spirituality is a dynamic and fluid expression which children seek to articulate in everyday life. As my study suggests, children's spiritual expressions were diverse and multi-faceted; they expressed their spirituality through empathy and concern for the human condition; meaning making and development of a worldview, and existential musing. This indicates that these 10-11-year-olds had the capacity to discuss complex and abstract spiritual matters. Consequently, I posit that my research reinforces an understanding of what spirituality looks like so it can be identified and nurtured in the primary classroom. Other studies (Hyde, 2008; Ng, 2012) have outlined ways for practitioners to nurture spirituality such as a pedagogy of awareness (Ng, 2012) which involves silence and reflection. I argue that picture books offer a space for both this and for conversation and discussion, and since picture fiction texts are widely used in schools, they offer a potentially accessible way to nurture primary pupils' spirituality.

My research has connected two fields of research, children's spirituality and literature, to highlight the close relationship between them and to offer new understandings about how storying can facilitate spiritual expression. Theory of mind (Turner, 1996) views story not as a cultural pursuit but as a way of thinking in its own right. One story (projected onto another) supports not only an understanding of themes but a way of ordering experience and meaning. Such generation of meaning and understanding of the self are characteristics of spirituality. My definition of spirituality encompasses the meaning of life and advancing narrative as a way of thinking promotes this endeavour, as humans strive to make meaning from the stories they tell and hear. The thesis has also endorsed previous research and scholarly insights (Hardy, 1988; Smith, 1992; Turner, 1996) that indicates imagination and metaphor are tools through which children can create meaning and add to their narratives of understanding.

Another aspect of contribution to knowledge is a new conceptual pedagogical model combining picture book literature with spirituality. The Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model (see Fig 6.1) is premised on the framing of literature, through narrative, as a way of

thinking, a primary act of mind (Hardy, 1998). In particular the model specifically relates to how picture books themselves as a genre of children’s literature can support spiritual expression in the classroom derived from thesis’ principal findings. The model incorporates findings pertaining to teacher pedagogy, how the class teacher used picture books to allow spiritual expressions to emerge (Strand two of research question 2). I assert that when the four elements which make up the model are present, they allow picture books to become a source of reflection and a space where children can contemplate and discuss ideas which can be described as spiritual as framed by my own conceptualisation of spirituality. The elements essentially act as a kind of live circuit to ignite the power of the picture book. The model is a conceptual extension of Pike’s (2000) work into poetry and spirituality, which recognised a ‘responsive pedagogy’ which was sensitive to an aesthetic reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1995). Consequently, I argue that my research findings have confirmed that picture books have the potential to foster children’s spirituality where certain important elements are in place. I now address these elements of the Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model.

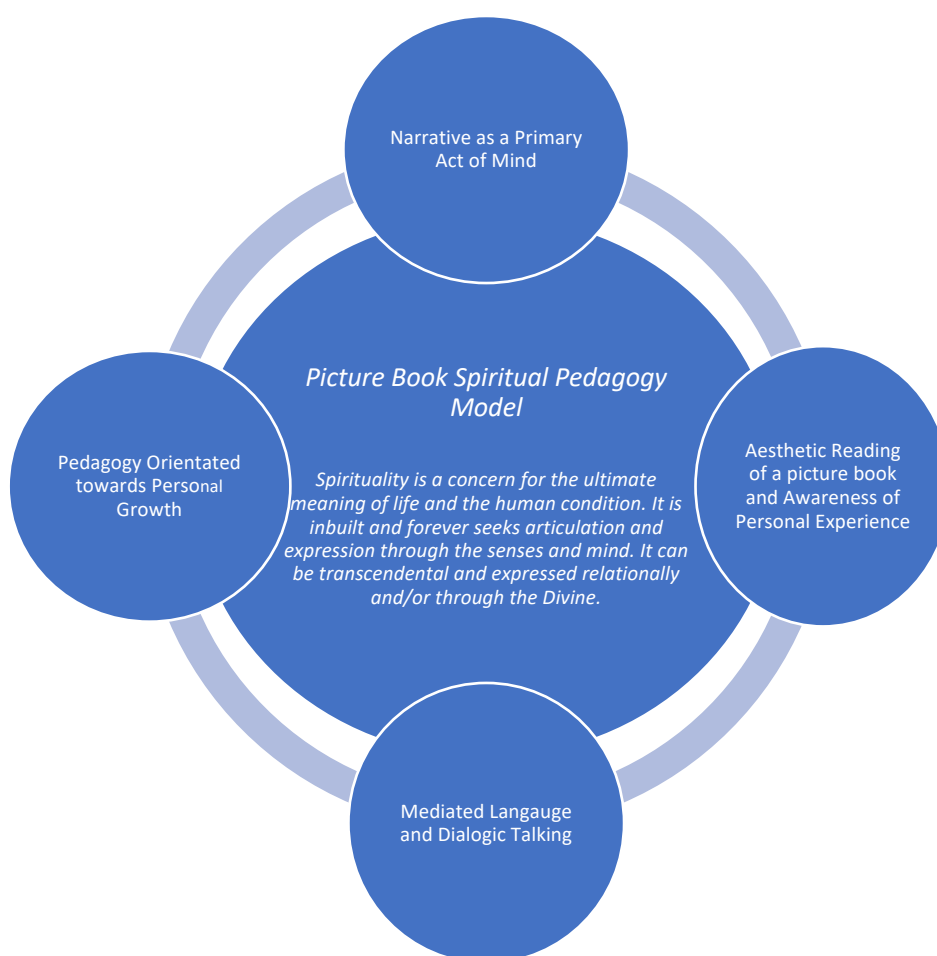


Figure 6.1 – Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model



My definition of a holistic and inclusive model of spirituality sits at the centre of the model as a way of recognising and describing spirituality. Firstly, the class teacher will be sensitive to a personal growth model of teaching. As discussed in chapter 1 this involves viewing literature as an important part of the curriculum for its transformative influence on children's personal growth as individuals. It also prioritises the child's experience as an active part of learning. From this, the second part of the cycle is an understanding of narrative as a primary act of mind transferred from life to art (Hardy, 1988) and storying as a way of ordering the world (Wells, 1986). The third element of the model is initiated by an aesthetic reading of the picture book, premised on a sensitive aesthetic view of reading (Rosenblatt, 1995) where children's own views, lives and experiences form part of a fluid and dynamic exchange during the reading. From this, children gain control over their understanding and meaning, which are expressions of their spirituality. Finally, the last element of the model is the use of dialogue within the teacher's pedagogy which privileges the co-construction of knowledge. This provides a fluid dialogic space (Maine, 2015) where children can add to their meanings collaboratively.

I argue that the Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogic Model is a new contribution to knowledge in the field which encompasses my findings from both research questions and posit that the model reflects how a sensitive space in the primary classroom can be used to facilitate and nurture children's spirituality. The model has important implications for both policy and practice.

#### 6.4 Implications for Policy and Practice

I began a professional doctoral study to not only to contribute empirically to the field of research but also to offer a practical professional understanding to the tension I discovered between policy and practice. As the quote at the beginning of the chapter states the 'end is where we start from' (T.S Eliot, 1974, p 208) and I with a concern for the paucity of empirical research into picture books, the policy tension confusion for teachers with legal and moral duties (Education Act, 1998) and inspection scrutiny (Ofsted, 2019), yet little practical support to nurture children's spirituality. Previous empirical studies have offered guidance to practitioners such as Hyde (2008), and more recently Ng (2012) with a

‘Pedagogy of Awareness’, yet this has made limited if no impact in professional practice. I realise that my small-scale enquiry may have limited effect on policy and practice too, yet I argue it can make a contribution. Policy tensions first ignited my enthusiasm to embark on this doctoral journey and this is where I turn to next.

### Implications for **Policy**:

Children’s Spiritual Expressions.

In chapter 1, I set out the tension difficulties in the research field and in policy terms over a definition of spirituality. The confusion and the disparity in educational policy documents pertaining to primary school pupils’ spirituality is evident in The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013). Much wrangling academically (Wright, 2000) and from policy makers (SCAA, 1995) has ensued. This has led to confusion at school level both in policy and practice.

As the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) aims to ‘promote’ spirituality, this presupposes an understanding of what it is one is promoting, and I posit that the expressions of children’s spirituality captured in this thesis, whilst children were engaged with picture fiction, can be supportive of practioners in my school and others. It can add to an understanding of how practitioners can recognise and identify some aspects of children’s spirituality in the primary classroom which in turn could serve to increase professional clarity and enhance my teachers’ ability to promote and nurture such an important aspect of children’s development.

Spirituality and the English Curriculum.

This thesis has outlined and advanced the close relationship between literature and spirituality (Eagleton, 2008). Findings revealed how aesthetic reading of literature may support children in deeper introspective thinking leading to spiritual expression. Pike (2015) recognises the potential literature has to extend children’s horizons and develop imagination. He posits that it’s possible to place spiritual education at the heart of English subject teaching. As a result of the role literature plays in English subject teaching, he contends there is an ethical dimension to teaching where ‘English provides a spiritual house or even home for young people’ (Pike, 2015, p.21). I concur and would wish my teachers to understand the potential of this.

The National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) hints at the role reading and in particular literature can play in promoting children's spirituality. Literature is a wide remit and this thesis enabled an examination of how picture book fiction can support children's expression of spirituality. Policy makers have omitted what type of literature and how literature can support children's spirituality; the findings in this thesis could fill the gap left by this omission in my school and others. Some picture books have powerful opportunities to support children's expressions of empathy and concern for the human condition, their meaning making and developing a worldview and existential musing, all of which are characteristic of children's spirituality. Exploiting opportunities to foster spirituality linked to a statutory subject such as English has the benefit of both raising its importance and place in a busy curriculum with many subjects competing for space and opportunity.

Having discussed how my findings may offer a contribution to policy I now turn to explore the possibilities for professional practice. As a Headteacher and researcher this has particular relevance.

#### Implications for **Practice**:

One of the motivations for the thesis was to support practitioners in fostering spirituality in a busy modern primary classroom. A central tenet of the research is to offer a new conceptual model which teachers can use in primary classrooms without having to add a new layer of subjects or set special curriculum time aside. It is here I argue the research offers the greatest benefit to practice: an English teaching model which can promote spirituality whilst also augmenting creative writing and literary skills. Arguments regarding the standards agenda and curricula designs in primary schools are wide ranging, and I seek to offer a practical initiative for schools using a Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model. Literacy is a subject that must be taught each day and is top of most primary schools' agendas, and if spiritual benefits can be explored during this time it offers practitioners the space many argue is needed to support such integral and important skills as spirituality.

Whilst parallels may be drawn to the model of the Philosophy for Children agenda in primary schools where Lipman (2003) sought to introduce children to philosophical

thinking through stories, I argue my own conceptual model does not seek to impart knowledge. Conversely, the stories and picture books in my own model serve to offer a conduit and support for children's own innate spirituality to flourish. Critics of a relativist and inclusive spiritual pedagogy model claim that spiritual expression outside of religion holds little value (Thatcher, 2000; Wright, 2000). I argue that my conceptual model, despite being inclusive and valuing the affective alongside the cognitive, is reminiscent of James' argument in *Varieties of Religious Experience* which is that while humans may seek to find intellectual expression for their (spiritual) experiences, this is no substitute for the original authentic experience which is personal and emotional (James, 1982).

#### Relationship between Picture Books and Expressions of Spirituality.

The research has identified that children can express their spirituality through the use of picture books such that practitioners can recognise and foster it. A list of quality picture books along with themes and topics could support practitioners to select titles to inspire and foster spiritual expression in the classroom.

#### Story Based Curriculum.

My research demonstrates the transformative power of narrative as a tool for thinking and making meaning. Practitioners can realise the power of storying to understand and order experience which could support them to adopt a literature-story based curriculum to foster spirituality with their pupils. The power of story as a way of thinking can also be applied to other subjects such as 'Maths Through Story' and using story as a stimulus for History and RE.

#### Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model.

Teachers who adopt a 'Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model' when using picture books can create opportunities in the classroom for children to express their spirituality. I am aware though of the limitations of this model and the inherent practical difficulties that it may present. Teachers, including student teachers, would need to be supported with an understanding of a personal growth model of teaching and sensitive to the benefits and role literature can play in children's lives. This may be supported by recent developments in the reading for pleasure agenda, which values the role reading and narrative has in the lives of young people and argue that 'children deserve to be introduced to literature...

which inspires them, that connects to their personal interests, enables them to develop text and authorial preferences and fosters their sense of self as a reader' (Kucirkova and Cremin, 2020, p. 70). Whilst picture books offer a way of exploring spiritual expressions with children, the teacher's pedagogy and how the book is read and shared is of vital importance. Professional development for teachers and trainee teachers in the four areas which make up the model could support not only the relationship between picture books and spirituality, but other areas of the curriculum also.

#### 6.5 Implications for myself as Headteacher

This study represents an important part of my career as a Headteacher. I have long harboured an understanding that literature has the power to transform lives and also how important spiritual expression is for children's well-being, and I plan to implement the findings immediately in my inner London primary school.

The contribution of the study in the form of a Picture Book Spiritual Pedagogy Model will I hope offer teachers in my school a helpful way to explore children's spirituality through the use of picture books. Firstly, I will be seeking to discuss the definition of spirituality with my staff and explain how the National Curriculum (DfE, 2013) and Ofsted (2019) policy documents can be of practical relevance in the classroom. A discussion and professional development on a personal growth model of teaching will I believe inspire practitioners, many of whom value the role literature plays in the lives of children. Pedagogically, practitioners will be able to experiment with the use of picture books and offer children opportunities to reflect upon their own experiences. This dynamic will offer teachers a practical and supportive way to interpret their duty to foster children's spiritual lives. Equipped with an understanding of what children's spirituality looks like, teachers will be supported to exploit opportunities for aesthetic reading of picture books and allow this space, which this thesis argues, is important for spiritual expression to flourish.

The research is timely as primary schools have been afforded freedom to design and implement a curriculum representative of their school. The new revised Ofsted framework (2019) has charged headteachers with the responsibility to design a curriculum which has three strands: Intent, Implementation and Impact. This thesis will have a direct impact on

this work as I will be designing a story-based curriculum where narrative is viewed as a way of thinking and every subject of the curriculum will begin with a story to contextualise the content and allow children to bring themselves and their ideas to it. The research will also guide the ethos of the school's curriculum where the Spiritual, Moral, Social and Cultural will be woven through using picture books and literature as a strong foundation.

#### 6.6 Limitations of the Study and Recommendation for Further Research

The 10-11-year-old children in this study had a deep capacity to express their spirituality through reflecting upon a range of existential issues, so I would suggest that research into the metaphysical nature of spirituality might be useful to explore this dimension of spirituality further. Exploration of multidisciplinary frameworks could also add to our understanding of how children express their spirituality. Empathy was a core feature of children's spirituality in this study and theory of mind was touched upon, so work which adopts a neurolinguistic stance might add to how expressions of spirituality effect the mind. Although this study was conducted in a community school without a religious dimension, it is unlikely that results may have been different in a faith context yet further research would confirm this. Whilst I was interested in exploring pupils' capacity for spiritual expression in their final year of primary school, a study focusing on younger children at the beginning of formal schooling might also prove fruitful to enhance understanding of children's spiritual expression using picture books.

The selection of three participants for this study is defended as it allowed for a narrow yet deep study to capture rich narrative descriptions over a short period which allowed me to successfully attend to my research questions, but new longitudinal research with larger numbers of children would be valuable. I also defend my choices as a researcher to select one of the children in the study to answer the second of my research questions. Phenomenological research is considered as describing the essence of an experience and an in-depth study of one of my participants offered rich and detailed textural description. My research confirmed how story can act as a way for children to articulate their spiritual understanding and how they naturally used imagination and metaphor to support abstract understanding of issues pertaining to the human condition, a feature of spiritual expression. In addition, an examination of children's imaginative writing based on picture

books might add further depth to understanding children's ability to internalise narratives and expression in their own written stories, or alternatively producing works of art representing their spirituality.

As discussed in chapter 3 one of the limitations of group interviews can be the trustworthiness of participants' responses. This can potentially happen where participants feel compelled to agree with a fellow member or feel that their own view is less worthy, leading to a group think response (Arksey and Knight, 1999). Individual interviews may have revealed more personal reflections yet the power balance and naturalistic elements may have inhibited discussion. Upon reflection, one way to have mitigated this even further would have been to explore the individual stories composed by the three children following each session and comparing this to their responses in the group interviews. Discussing children's responses with them on an individual basis between sessions may also have added additional insights into trustworthiness of interpretation.

However, the trustworthiness of the interpretation of children's responses is defended as the number of participants was relatively small and through my reflexivity as researcher in ensuring all participants had opportunities to talk and contribute. Also, my triangulation of group interview data with my field notes of classroom observation added a layer of checks in terms of trustworthiness in reflecting children's own authentic responses. The data reflects that children expressed their own views and negotiated meaning with each other which they used to further explore and make sense of the stories. The children's authentic experiences recorded in the data reflect that they brought their own aesthetic experiences to the text and the wide-ranging discussions reflecting a plurality of voices in the data. The hermeneutic interpretation and reflection on the participants language and experience also capture the individual nature of the participants' voices.

Further research might include: how the study of wordless picture books can foster children's spirituality? An aspect of children's literature which has not received any attention in regard to its relationship to spirituality is that of visual literacy such as film. Another research question might include: How images, not only in picture books, but in visual media, such as film, can support children's spirituality? Additional research might

also explore children's experiences in different social contexts to the participants in my study.

#### Methodology.

The selection and use of a hermeneutical phenomenological approach to data analysis is defended in the thesis for its particular ability to generate rich and intricate data on a sensitive subject. The plethora of data generated by such a methodology has been discussed in chapter 3 as a limitation. However, the use of this methodology adds to available knowledge in the approach I adopt. Goodliff (2013) assumed a hermeneutic phenomenology analysis from a horizon of understanding (Gadamer, 2013) built around interpretive reflection and conversation with observed episodes (texts) of very young children's play and being. Hyde's (2008) and Posey's (2013) hermeneutic analysis is reflected through the lens of 'Lifeworld Existentials', categories of observational sensitivities of being in the world (Van Manen, 1990). My own interpretation of hermeneutic phenomenology analysis offers a slightly new angle. I enter the horizon of understanding of the hermeneutic texts through the understanding of using picture books in a classroom setting to explore spirituality. Previously unexplored empirically using a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. My reflections are driven by Gadamerian's (2013) language and Van Manen (1990) thematic observational approach and interpretations of the children's experiences. Having isolated significant statements and recurring phrases, themes emerged from the data. Through hermeneutic reflection and interpretation on the data extracts for each of these themes, I entered into the horizon of understanding between my own understanding articulated by my definition of spirituality, the literature and the children's experiences.

Reflecting on my journey as a doctoral researcher is an important aspect of research. I consider the methods chosen and defended in chapter 3 allowed me to successfully attend to my two research questions. I am aware of the criticism regarding generalisability with my choice of case study (Yin, 2018) yet argue that the thick and rich data produced mitigates this criticism. Interviewing was a successful tool to gain an understanding of children's experience with picture books and to explore their spirituality. I was mindful of adopting open ended questions such as "I wonder.....?". A full list of prepared questions is located in the (Appendix 8). I was guided by the types of questions used in the interviews of research in the field for e.g. (Erricker et al, 1997; Hay and Nye, 1998; Hyde, 2008), all of



which are designed to allow the fullest expression of a uniquely personal and individual area of the human condition. Individual interviews might on reflection have offered a different perspective of children's experiences, yet I consider the group interviews offered children a supportive environment to speak and share ideas.

## 6.7 Conclusion

The thesis set out to explore a fundamental part of primary school pupils' lives, how they express their spirituality. To attend to this aim, three children in their final year of primary school were selected to see how using picture books could support their spirituality.

A link between children's literature and spirituality (Eagleton, 2008) was evidenced and it was seen that the chosen picture books and the teacher's pedagogy enabled them to express their spirituality. The study has also highlighted how within a situated spiritual pedagogy practitioners can deploy picture books to explore spirituality in the classroom. Equipping practitioners with the understanding to recognise children's expressions of spirituality and how to use picture books to create a space for spirituality to flourish has the potential to add to my school's policy and practice. It offers a platform from which further research can take place into this somewhat neglected area of child development.

At the time of writing the conclusion to this thesis the world is in the grips of the Covid-19 pandemic and children are experiencing an unsettling time, not being able to attend school or receive the 'normal' support from their teachers. The study has revealed that children have a capacity to engage with many polemic and existential issues and weave meanings from picture books. The need to nourish children's spirituality now is particularly critical in order to support them to make sense of how life and its freedoms have been changed and curtailed. Children may also wish to explore texts which enable them to consider loss, absence and potential explanations pertaining to the absence of being able to visit family and friends. Schools will need to attend to children's emotional well-being and their spirituality. I argue that the need for teachers to recognise and understand how to support children's spirituality is more urgent than ever before. This, coupled with the very limited research currently into children's spirituality, presents an opportunity to implement the

findings practically in my own school and those schools which form part of our local network.

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## Appendices

### Key to Appendices:

1. HREC Consent Letter
2. Pupil Information Sheet
3. Pupil Consent Letter
4. Parental Information and Consent letter
5. Parental Picture Book Information
6. Class Teacher information Sheet
7. Class Teacher Consent Letter
8. Semi-Structure Interview Questions
9. Significant Statements for Research Question 1
10. Hermeneutic Reflective Data Texts Harry
11. Hermeneutic Reflective Data Texts Iris
12. Hermeneutic Reflective Data Texts Fatima

## 1.HREC Letter



From Dr Louise Westmarland  
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee  
Email [louise.westmarland@open.ac.uk](mailto:louise.westmarland@open.ac.uk)  
Extension 01908 652462

To Darren Jones CREET

Project title 'Exploring the Use of Picture Books and Primary School  
Children's Spirituality'

HREC Ref HREC 2016 2295 Jones

AMS ref

Submitted 05/05/16

Decision date 27/06/16

## Memorandum

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC).

Please note the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, any information contained in the original application, or a later amendment which would raise questions about the safety and/or continued conduct of the research.
2. It is essential that any proposed amendments to the research are sent to the HREC for review, so they can be recorded and a favourable opinion given prior to the any changes being implemented (except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher is may be effected).
3. You are authorised to present this memorandum to outside bodies such as NHS Research Ethics Committees in support of any application for future research clearance. Also, where there is an external ethics review, a copy of the application and outcome should be sent to the HREC.
4. OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and their frameworks for research ethics.
5. At the conclusion of your project, by the date stated in your application, you are required to provide the Committee with a final report to reflect how the project has progressed, and importantly whether any ethics issues arose and how they were dealt with. A copy of the final report template can be found on the research ethics website - [http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/human-research-ethics-full-review-process-and-proforma#final report](http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/human-research-ethics-full-review-process-and-proforma#final%20report).

Kind regards,  
Dr Louise Westmarland  
Chair OU HREC <http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/>



**Research Project: Exploring the Use of Picture Books and Primary School Children's Spirituality'**

**Year 6 Participant Information Sheet**

Thank you for wanting to take part in the research project. This sheet gives you a bit more information.

- ❖ The project will last 3 weeks and will be in Extended Writing lessons
- ❖ In the lessons I will video your responses when you listen to the story to see how you respond to the pictures and story when your teacher reads it
- ❖ You will write your story like everybody else in Year 6
- ❖ After break we will meet all 3 of you and you will answer some questions about the book you have read, what you thought of it and you can talk about the story you have written. **This will last 40 minutes**
- ❖ I will record this so that I can write up what you have said
- ❖ **Your names will not be included and not all what you say will be included in the project.**
- ❖ **You can withdraw any time before the start of the project by July 1<sup>st</sup> and after the project by telling your parents or teacher**
- ❖ When the research is done I will look at what you have said and write it up to try and help teachers use pictures books and look how they can help children to think about things which I call spirituality
- ❖ You can ask me any questions about it and tell me if you are not happy with any part of it.



**Exploring the Use of Picture Books and Primary School Children's Spirituality'**

Dear Year 6,

**Participation in Research Project**

I am writing to let you know more information about the research project. I will be looking at how we use picture books in Creative Writing lessons and I am interested in how you respond when you read and discuss the books with your teacher. I am looking at how perhaps the stories can help support spirituality; this means how you think about life and the meaning of things and what you believe.

After reading the book and writing the stories I would like to interview you all together and ask you some questions about the story, your ideas and the writing you have done. I will record these so I can remember what you have said afterwards.

Please read the statements and tick the box if you understand and agree.

- ☐ I understand that I will be filmed during the reading of the book in class
- ☐ I will discuss my thoughts, feelings and understanding about the books together and this will be recorded
- ☐ I know that my name will be changed in the write up of the project
- ☐ I know that what I say will be included in the project but it will not be identifiable by my name
- ☐ I can leave the project by telling my parents or teachers at any time and before July 1<sup>st</sup> and at any time after the research has finished.

If you have ticked all above, please sign to say you agree and understand (an adult can help you read these)

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

Thank you

Mr Jones





Dear Parents/Carers

**Research Project: Picture Books and Children's Spirituality**

I am involved in studying for a Doctorate in Education and I hope to discover any potential insights that may support teachers in their practice.

I write with the intention to seek permission for your child to be involved in the research project which looks at how the study of literature may affect children's spirituality.

The research would involve three classroom observations in Extended Writing lessons, one each week and followed by a group **discussion**. The research will be unobtrusive and I will explain all procedures to your child such as when the observations will take place and information about how to tell me if they do not want to be involved in the research at any stage in the process. Please note that the interviews will be recorded and all data will be kept securely. **I would like to stress that this is a research project and not part of the school curriculum and children/parents who decide not to participate will not be disadvantaged in any way, educationally or in the school in general.** I would like to make it completely clear that there is no obligation on the part of your child **or yourselves** to give consent to consent to participate in this project.

All data collected will be kept confidential and pupil's names will be completely anonymous, which means your child will not be identifiable from the research. Your child will be able to withdraw from the research at any stage before **and during** the three-week period. Also, the research has been given approval by the **Open University Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)**

The **Proposed** research will take place over 3 weeks in Extended Writing Lessons and include the following:

- Children will be videoed during the discussion of the picture books and their responses to the words and pictures as the class teacher reads the text. **An information sheet about the texts studied is included.**
- Children will write a story based on the text
- Participants to discuss the book and their writing in a group interview. This will be semi-structured, so some questions will be prepared but also the pupils can lead and take the discussion in different directions
- The research will require no extra work on the part of pupils
- The children can withdraw at any point during the research **by telling you or the class teacher**
- The interviews will be recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed and analysed
- All children's real names will be anonymised and will not be recognisable in the thesis

If you are happy for your child to be involved in the research, please could you complete the permission slip below.

Many thanks in anticipation of your time and consideration.

Darren Jones - Researcher

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I give permission for my child \_\_\_\_\_ in class 6 \_\_\_\_ to be involved in the research project and I am completely aware that I may withdraw my child from this at any point in the process.

Signed (Parent/Guardian) \_\_\_\_\_



**Parental Information Documents – Texts studied during the research project.**



The first picture book selected 'The Island by Amir Greder' recounts the responses of an island community when an immigrant arrives and how the islanders are divided in the treatment of the individual, which allows for the exploration of a range of human emotions relating to difference, identity, racism and values of the human being.



The second picture book 'The Big, Little Book of Happy Sadness by the Australian writer Colin Thompson raises the issue of loneliness and eccentricity. George a little boy without friends and parents who lives with his grandmother finds his opposite in Jeremy a three-legged dog nobody wants and is about to go to through the green door that leads to Heaven in the local dog pound. The story is poignant and hopeful and raises interesting themes and emotions.



The third and final picture book is the little-known title 'The Harmonica'. This story depicts a Polish Jewish family torn apart by the ravages of war in the 1940's and separated and taken to a concentration camp. Depicting the themes of intolerance, futility of war and hatred, and the book contrasts the brutal Nazi guard who can act barbarically yet appreciate the beauty of Chopin played on the harmonica by the book's central character.



### **Class Teacher Information Sheet**

Many thanks for agreeing to be part of the research project. This sheet gives you a little more information on the process.

- The research will take place over 3 weeks in Extended Writing Lessons
- Children will be videoed during the discussion of the picture books and their responses to the words and pictures as you as class teacher reads the text
- Children will write a story based on the text
- Following this after break I will invite the participants to discuss the book and their writing in a group interview. This will be away from the classroom and will be semi-structured, so some questions will be prepared but also the pupils can lead and take the discussion in different directions
- The research will require no extra work on the part of pupils
- The children can withdraw at any point during the research
- The interviews will be recorded on a Dictaphone and transcribed and analysed
- All children's real names will be anonymised and will not be recognisable in the thesis
- I will be completely available if you wish to discuss any aspects of the research process.



Dear Year 6 Class Teacher,

**Research Project: Picture Books and Children's Spirituality**

I am involved in studying for a Doctorate in Education and I hope to discover any potential insights that may support teachers in their practice.

I write with the intention to seek permission to work in your classroom with three pupils. The research project which looks at how the study of literature may affect children's spirituality, by which I mean, responses to existential questions such as the meaning of life and why we are here; themes such as heaven and death, our position in the world and reactions to emotional and social justice themes such as poverty, courage, compassion and concern for the human condition. Spirituality here can refer to both religious and non-religious contexts.

Please be assured that there is absolutely no requirement or expectation for you to be part of the research and there will be no disadvantage if you decide not to be involved. Please feel free to ask any questions and talk about any potential concerns. I stress that there is no obligation professionally or otherwise to agree to participate.

The research would involve three classroom observations in Creative Writing lessons, one each week. The children will be videoed as you read and explore the texts. This will then be followed by a group interview which will take place away from the classroom.

All data collected will be kept confidential and you will not be identified. The research has been given approval by the **Human Research and Ethics Committee at the Open University (HREC)**

Please can you confirm if you are happy to be involved by signing below.  
Many thanks in anticipation of your time and consideration.

Darren - Researcher

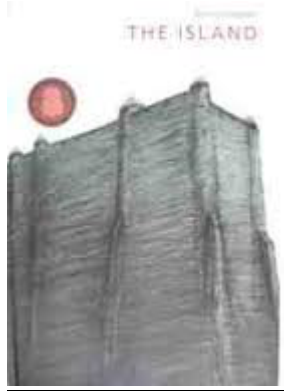
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I am happy to be involved in the research project mentioned above.

Signed \_\_\_\_\_

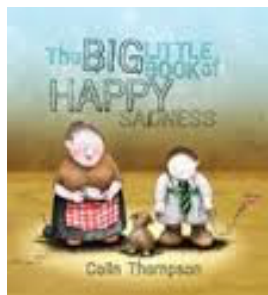
**Semi-Structured Interview Questions**

**Group Interview Week 1: Picture Book: The Island by Armin Greder**



1. Can you tell me how you felt when we read the story the Island?
2. What happened in the story?
3. I wonder what you thought about how the islanders treated the 'stranger'
4. What did you think about the way the islanders treated the fishermen?
5. I wonder if the story is similar to your life and what you have experienced.
6. Tell me about the reaction of the islanders to a new person/stranger arriving in their country
7. Are there any important issues in the story?
9. Tell me what you were thinking about when the teacher was reading the story?
10. Do you feel the book helps you to understand the issues?
11. I wonder if the book makes it difficult to understand the themes
12. What did you think about the pictures and words in the story?
13. I wonder if you had to pick a page which captured the story for you, what would that be?

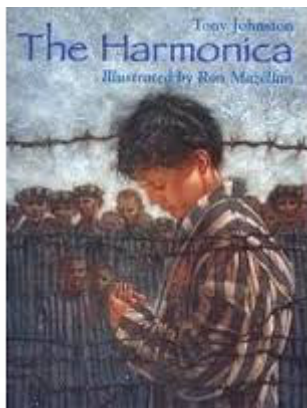
**Group Interview Week 2: Picture Book: The Big Little Book of Happy Sadness by Colin Thompson**



1. Can you talk to me about the picture book you read today in class?
2. I wonder what it made you think about.

3. What did you think about the pictures and the colours in the book?
4. Why do you think George was so lonely?
5. In the story it says that George 'had an empty place inside him' what do you think this meant?
6. Jeremy, the dog was in 'the last cage where dogs go just before going to Heaven' can you tell me what you think about this?
7. Let's look at the book, are there any pictures or words or parts of the story you would like to mention or talk about? Why?
8. Can you tell me what you were thinking about when your teacher was reading the story?
9. I wonder why Jeremy said 'perhaps he did go through the green door and had died and was in Heaven' when he went to live with George
10. What did you decide to write about in your stories? Would you like to share a part of your story or talk about what you thought about in your writing?
11. I wonder what the book was trying to tell us
12. Did you learn anything from the book?
13. Are there any parts of the story you can think about in your own life?
14. What do you think are the important issues in the story?

### **Group Interview 3: The Harmonica by Tony Johnson**



1. I wonder what the author in the story was trying to tell us in this story
2. What parts of the story did you take to write about?
3. I wonder if the pictures helped you understand the story?
4. How did you feel when the Nazi soldiers tore the family apart?
5. What do you think the boy was feeling when he had to use his mouth organ to play for the Nazi guard?
6. How did you feel when the guard spat and said 'Play Jew, play'?
7. I wonder what went through your mind when you were looking at the pictures and your teacher was reading the words
8. The book says it is about how the human spirit can survive. What do you think this might mean?



9. The boy faces a dilemma in the story: how a cruel guard can appreciate the beauty of Schubert's music. What do you think about this?
10. The start of the book it says 'I can't remember my father or mothers face but I remember their love' what do you think about this?
11. Which picture in the book helps explain how you felt about the story?
12. What does the cover of the book make you think about?
13. How does the author use words or pictures to make you feel or understand the story?
14. What will you remember about the story?

## 9. Significant Statements for Research Question 1

| Research Question 1<br>Area of Focus   | Significant Thematic Meanings from Hermeneutic Texts  | Evidence Examples of Significant Statements to Categorise felt senses into Themes  |
|--|---|--|
| Expressions of Children's Spirituality | <b>Empathy and Concern for the Human Condition</b> – children felt a sense of knowingness in their connection to characters and to their plight, and related this to their own experience or lack of it. A deep concern for the human condition was regularly expressed.  | <p>I think this is really, really wrong because nobody deserves to be treated in that way, even if they've done something probably really, really bad. The man in the story didn't actually do anything wrong; he just wanted... He was hungry, like Iris said; all he wanted was some food. Putting him in a goat's pen wasn't the right way to treat him</p> <p><i>F Response to The Island – Group Interview</i></p> <p>If he didn't say anything at all, it's kind of judging a book by its cover, just because he didn't have any clothes maybe he was different to them....it's like in real life it could be like if you're black or if you're a different race you could be treated differently.</p> <p><i>I Response to The Island – Group Interview</i></p> <p>I think it's really unfair just because of how they look, because all the islanders were bigger than him as he was very skinny and a lot smaller.</p> <p><i>H response to The Island – Group Interview</i></p> <p>Mainly, when George is at the shelter, I think that, like, your time will come, like, for the whole story and for most of George's life, he's been upset but then, now, like, his time's come because he found the dog and the dog's time's come because even if it is just at the very end, if it was, like, at the end for the dog but then George saved him. So no matter how much waiting you have to do there will be, like, a light at the end of the tunnel, basically.</p> <p><i>I response to The Big Little Book of Happy Sadness (BLBHS) - Group Interview</i></p> |
|  | <b>Meaning Making and Worldview Narrative</b> – children appeared to approach the reading of the story with a sense of their own 'personal' meanings and world view relating to the events in the book. Children tended to explore their own understanding and meaning of challenging concepts relating to death, | <p>Well, I thought they had a very close friendship bond. Then, when it died, it will probably be like a person dying, because in the book it said that he loved the dog, probably, more than a brother. So if my brother died, I'd be very upset. So if I loved someone more than my brother, then he'd very, very, very upset.</p>   |

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|  | <p>their families, and immigration. Children drew from a wide range of personal experience sources in their life ranging from media settings such as television and film and other literature sources such as novels and books they had read.</p> | <p><b><i>F response to the picture book BLBHS Group Interview</i></b></p> <p>He's feeling loneliness as he doesn't have any parents who actually love him properly</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>Because, like, near the end of the book there's a man in a concentration camp and he, like, beats people, and like to death, and like without mercy. Then a boy plays the harmonica and he still sees the beauty. So he's trying to show how beautiful music is.</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book The Harmonica</i></b></p> <p>Even though the people up in our classroom didn't do the interview, they took something away from this, because there's quite a lot of, like- Not pressure but, these days, because it's all about, like, the fashion and if you don't have, like, the best phone, stuff like that, I hope they took stuff away from that and just realise that you don't have to be perfect.</p> <p><b><i>I response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>I think he's very selfish because, like, he's kind of using him, almost like a puppet, because he makes him and go as he please, and if he doesn't do it properly, he'll just dispose of him. Yes, he just controls everybody and everything, just because he has power.</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book The Harmonica</i></b></p> <p>I don't think so, because he knows that if he didn't play, he would have died, and because they would have killed him. Because it says in one of the pages that, like, one wrong note and he would be, like, dead, so he didn't play for joy. He played for, like, mercy, kind of.</p> <p><b><i>I response to the picture book The Harmonica</i></b></p> |
|  | <p><b>Existential Musing</b> - children were keen to ponder some of life's essential meanings and to express their views on heaven, God, the soul and why tragic events in the world take place.</p>  | <p>It's, kind of, like who the person is. The soul is everything that you don't see in a person, from the outside</p> <p><b><i>H Response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>I don't think anyone is completely evil, but I think if he wanted to appreciate the boy and his music, he shouldn't do it with a whip</p> <p><b><i>I response to the picture book The Harmonica</i></b></p> <p>Your heart, like gives you happiness and, like gives you almost the ability to have friends</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book The Harmonica</i></b></p>   |

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|  |  | <p>But the soul is basically how you feel, it makes you- You know, people say you have, like a sad soul, that's not a good thing, like, you always want a happy soul.</p> <p><b><i>F response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>As Fatima was saying, the souls rise up, it's because, like, your body is left here but your soul, your person, goes up.</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>Like Harry said, with the skull, and also on the other page it's, kind of, like all the darkness is, like, draining out onto, like, the light</p> <p><b><i>I response to The Harmonica</i></b></p> <p>The way I would see, like, an easier way to describe, like, the soul in a person, from my point of view, would be, like, a book. The person is the book but then, all their personalities and, like, how they care is all the words inside.</p> <p><b><i>H response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> <p>This book shows that life can actually be literally like heaven.</p> <p><b><i>F response to the picture book BLBHS</i></b></p> |
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Extract 4a: Significant Statements of Children's Expression of Spirituality

## 10.Excerpts of Data: Hermeneutic Reflection for Harry

The *Big Little Book of Happy Sadness (BLBHS)* is a powerful picture book which raises many complex emotions and allows the children to engage vicariously with issues affecting society. Harry appeared to respond sensitively to the reading of *BLBHS* (see table 4b). He discussed image 4a with his talk partner and suggested that the yellow light in the middle of the floor was a space where George's parents should have been. The text implies that the parents are not in George's life and Harry interpreted this as meaning that they are dead; my classroom observation noticed he displayed a sad and emotional response and was able to ascertain that through the words and the sensitive illustrations which reflect a sombre mood.

Harry's personal response was valued both by the teacher and his talk partner, allowing him vicariously to explore another person's feelings. He captured the character's loneliness and appeared to relate it to his own experience when speaking to the class; he stated that George will feel lonelier at the weekends as he doesn't have his friends in school to talk to, and appeared to sense the distress George is feeling. Although Harry stated that he didn't relate the experience to himself, the pictures painted a bleak mood which allowed him to sensitively react to the artwork. On many occasions Harry volunteered answers when they were directed to the whole class, illustrating both his engagement with and desire to talk about the picture book. He appeared to grasp the themes of the story and discussed in the class observations how it might be to experience loneliness and not fitting in from the perspective of George, the boy in the story.

| Time  | Observation  | Reflection and Interpretation   |
|-------|--|---|
| 01:29 | Teacher is exploring page 1 and 2 of the picture book 'The Little, Big Book of Happy Sadness' where there is a concrete space and a big blob of yellow light – see image 4a<br>Teacher asks pupils to look at the page: 'What is really powerful about how this is set out?' | Harry – 'The light looks very bright as if it is the place where his mum and dad should be'<br>The teacher captures this excitedly and states that is an interesting comment. He steers the class to think why light? |
| 04:52 | The teacher shows children a page where the concrete wall imposes in on the reader and we see George's back and a dog in a cage  | Harry appears gripped by the story and had a look of sadness as the teacher stated how lonely George the character was.<br>Harry is selected to respond to the class:   |

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|   | The teacher lowers his voice and asks the class to think about the significance of the phrases 'the weekend is the time where lonely people realise just how lonely they are' and 'even the concrete had given up under there'.   | 'Maybe when he is in school, he has friends and people to speak to but as he has only his grandmother, he feels lonely without a parent.'  |
| 07:40   | The teacher shows the children an image which depicts the boy George staring into a cage at the dog.<br>The class teacher repeats the phrase in the story:<br>'George stared at the dog and the dog stared at George and they knew they were both seeing a reflection of each other'.<br>The children were asked to discuss this phrase and the illustration. | Harry and Iris were paired and discussed how the dog appeared caged and unloved without any friends or family and that this was a similar plight for George. Harry stated that he didn't know what that felt like but 'the pictures made it feel bleak'. Both grasped the teacher's idea that loneliness pervaded both boy and dog's life. |
| 08:27   | The Class teacher asks why George feels so lonely... Is George loved... what's the difference between his parents' and grandparents' love?  | Harry responds to this and says that it is powerful because George's grandmother doesn't understand him and he probably really misses his mum and dad....  |
| Extract 4b- Classroom Observation – Picture Book <i>BLBHS</i> |   |  |

Harry continued to explore the picture in the group interview and showed signs of attempting to understand the life of the character George in the *BLBHS*.

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| Interviewer: What about you, would you like to be an islander like in this story?  |
| Harry: I think it would be quite a bad atmosphere because, if you relate it to real life, if a foreign person came on a plane and you arrived with a mob of people with pitchforks, chasing you and questioning you of where you came from, and just throwing you away to a goat pen-. |
| Extract 4f Interview The Island  |

Harry is able to make an internal judgement about the moral behaviour of the islanders and seems to relate it to modern day society. Although the picture book depicts the arrival of a stranger on a raft from the sea, Harry talks about getting off a plane and confronting such hostile behaviour. He talks about how people suffering this might face a bad atmosphere so has used the picture book to confront and start to make sense of this behaviour. Using pitch forks to intimidate and then locking a stranger in a goat pen has stimulated Harry's response to realise such behaviour is worrying and upsetting. He also comments on the intrusive nature of being questioned about your background, perhaps

indicating how strange he feels it would be to be restricted on where you can go and, more importantly, how others can restrict your movements and treat you adversely.

Harry seems to be attempting to understand the events and contextualise them into his own internal narrative through empathising with the islander's situation. He has considered from a point of his own understanding how he would feel and react if this situation were happening in modern society.

Memories and past connections to events can be reactivated and stimulated by a story. Harry may be making sense of the fictional events in *The Island*, relating them to his own personal experience and 'understanding characters' emotions by connecting them to relevant emotionally charged memories' (Nikolajeva & Scott, 2006, p.288). Harry's feeling of injustice might be linked to feelings of this kind that he has previously felt as the text activates this memory. I noted during the interview how Harry appeared to be quite resolved in his tone that he had been moved, and was determined that this behaviour in the book was unjust. As Hart notes, 'children have a tremendous capacity to recognise injustice, hypocrisy and empathy' (2003, p.74).

| Observation  | Reflection and Interpretation  |
|--|--|
| The teacher shares an image with the class and states that the commandant is not portrayed in a good light and that he has dogs next to him and a whip in his hand.  | Harry appears engrossed in the reading and his facial expressions appear to reflect the difficult situation in which the boy in the book finds himself.  |
| The teacher discusses with children the moral dilemma the boy finds himself in; he has to play the beautiful music of Schubert to a guard who kills. Secondly, how the boy can reconcile surviving on the scraps of bread when the others around him starve. | In partnered discussion Harry expresses incredulity and shock at how the guard treats the boy and how he misuses his power.<br>Harry appears to grasp the philosophical issues around power, also the nature of beauty and ugliness in people. |

Extract 4.Z.4 Classroom Observation *The Harmonica*

Harry pursues this introspection on existential matters as he talks about the motives and behaviour of the Nazi guard in the concentration camp and how the Jewish children are treated in Extract 4.Z.4.

**Harry:** I think he's very selfish because, like, he's kind of using him, almost like a puppet, because he makes him and go as he pleases, and if he doesn't do it properly, he'll just dispose of him. Yes, he just controls everybody and everything, just because he has power.

Extract 4.Z.5 Group Interview *The Harmonica*

Creating such cognitive conflict in Harry brings him face to face with a moral and fundamentally existential question, why does such power rest with one person? He explores how the guard can act so selfishly and use the boy without any consideration. Harry is adding to a worldview and pondering the actions of people in society. He expresses the injustice at how humans can treat each other badly through the use of power. From his current worldview he is weaving threads of philosophical and existential understanding which he confronts in the story to further his understanding about the world. He relates the power imbalance and struggle between the boy and the guard to a puppet, suggesting that the boy is helpless in such a situation and cannot control what he does. The picture book has set the scene for such exploration and intense introspection which Harry is developing and sharing with the group. This malleable view is constantly shifting and changing as he relates more individual experiences to his understanding; such themes in the picture book can challenge or refine this viewpoint further. Harry expresses the 'openness, and vulnerability that allows children to explore perplexing and paradoxical questions' (Hart, 2003, p.92).



| Observation   | Reflection and Interpretation  |
|---|--|
| Teacher is exploring the picture book <i>The Island</i> which deals with how society treats the stranger. In particular how the priest states that a stranger would clash with the rest of the choir. | <p>Iris' face changes as she listens to the teacher tell the story. The teacher reads that the parents tell children if they don't eat up the stranger will come and get them. She looks puzzled and frowns. The teacher focuses on the small boxed image of the priest and the choir.</p> <p>The teacher asks the children to discuss in pairs and Iris states clearly how people in responsible positions should treat the stranger with kindness. She is referring to the picture where a priest is not welcoming. She says that a religious person should be kind to everybody and talks how the stranger's face stands out against the background of the islanders. -See Image 4C <i>The Island</i></p> |

Classroom Observation Extract 4c

Here Iris expresses her incredulity at the treatment of the stranger and the inherent lies and fear that sweep the island about him. Her reaction is characteristic of frustration that he was placed in a quasi-jail, the goat pen, for being different; she understands that this appears to be unfair and unjust to the man. Also, the newspaper has associated him with a knife and the presumption is that he is a murderer. Iris tries to comprehend and express how a stranger looking for food can be treated like a murderer and in so doing is pushing the boundaries of her understanding of how society works. The vicarious experience of these issues from the safety of the picture books in the classroom is, it would appear, leading Iris to rich and powerful understanding.

The picture book *The Island* is made up of gothic European expressionist style imagery depicting how islanders from all sectors of society treat the stranger who lands on their shores. A double page spread in the book is organised into sections of a teacher, a priest and a parent, people who one would expect to show care and compassion, and how they behave towards the stranger. I capture the essence of Iris' revulsion at how people in authority such as the priest and teacher treat the stranger in observation Extract 4c. In her partner talk she feels shocked and surprised that the priest didn't offer to help the stranger, stating that religious people should be kind to all. Hart describes how children

have ‘a tremendous capacity to recognise injustice, hypocrisy, and suffering, and to speak a true word, to empathise and to offer spontaneous expressions of compassion, mercy and forgiveness’ (Hart, 2003, p74). Iris illustrates this ‘tremendous capacity’ in her reaction to the character’s situation.

In one of the pictures, the mum is saying, “Eat up,” but if he doesn’t want to eat up, they could just give the food to the man. Like in one of the pictures the wife had a whole pot and it was just the one really fat islander just eating all of it. He could be just giving it to the others.

Extract 4u Group Interview – Iris – *The Island*

Iris revisits this attitude in Extract 4u and demonstrates a strong empathy with the stranger, once again interpreting the behaviour of the islanders and their attitudes. The inequality of life seems to be presented to Iris and she faces a cognitive conflict (Cottingham, 2005) as she attempts to decide for herself what are the right actions and what is the correct way to treat the stranger. The stranger’s need for food juxtaposed against an overweight islander with too much presents Iris with a worldly allegory.

I think that could relate to real life – if not [in the 0:09:35] countries, maybe at schools if you’re really lonely. Like there they consider him as like a murderer, like they just drew a picture of him with a knife and stuff, but he hasn’t done anything wrong; all he wanted was some food. That’s when he got out of the goat’s pen and he didn’t do anything wrong there; it’s not like he was breaking out, because it was like a goat’s [pen] [Crosstalk 0:09:53].

Extract 4o Group Interview – Iris – *The Island*

The phrase \_\_\_\_ when you look into someone that you know. It's basically looking in a reflection because the dog is being isolated and alone and not looked after and, kind of, neglected as well. And so is George, he's not being looked after properly because he has his grandma and, you know, it's harder for her to look after than with regular parents because she's old and she's frail and she needs looking after as well as George does. So, it, kind of, makes them, when they look at each other's eyes they realise that they're basically seeing a reflection of themselves meaning that, basically, they're looking into themselves.

Extract 4k Group Interview – Fatima – *BLBHS*

Fatima's compassion and concern extend not just to humans but also to animals as she discusses the concept of loneliness in table 4k. Fatima rather movingly discusses her understanding of loneliness through a phrase in the story where George looked at the dog and the dog looked at George and they knew they were seeing a reflection of each other. This powerful and moving phrase cuts to the heart of how people treat each other. Fatima recognises the parental love that is missing from George's life and the human care from the dog's life. She recognises the complexities in human relationships and discusses how the grandmother's frailty might prevent her from caring for George. She picks up on the isolation the dog felt from being deprived of human kindness and having to live in the dog shelter. There is a poignancy in Fatima's description of how George and the dog looked into each other's eyes, as she recognises the importance of human love and affection.

I think the boy was just thinking very, very deeply, and must be thinking hard, because it's very hard for people to remember, like, the feel, the love. Most people just remember the appearance of how the person looked, but this boy actually remembered how they felt, and the love that he got.

Extract 4l Group Interview – Fatima – *The Harmonica*

Fatima offers a tender response to how the young Jewish boy felt at the loss of his parents in *The Harmonica*, and how he worries he can't remember their faces. Fatima responds to the vicarious grief experienced by the character sensitively and expresses how the boy is reminded of the felt sense of love and not how his parents looked. Such a depth of sensitivity for human suffering and empathic concern for the human condition fosters a potential understanding of her own spirituality.